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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

OCTOBER
1991

'The Road to Jerusalem'

by Mary Gentle

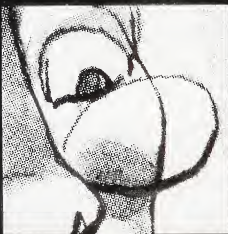
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interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 52**October 1991**

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Interface

David Pringle

Red faces all round. Not only does this issue not feature a redesign of the magazine (as I half-promised in the editorial of *Interzone* 50), but it now looks as though no such redesign will be forthcoming in the immediate future. We've dispensed with the services of the design house, **Helter Skelter**, who were working on a new look for the magazine, and we've gone back to our old, tried and trusted, methods of production.

Helter Skelter's contribution to this magazine was to have been tripartite—they were going to experiment with typesetting *Interzone*, they were going to art-edit it, and finally they were going to redesign it. Unfortunately, the two issues which they typeset and largely art-edited, numbers 49 and 50, turned out to be full of typographical and other errors. Hence we felt we couldn't entrust them with the redesign.

APOLOGIES AND CORRECTIONS

So, apologies are due. Firstly, to our readers, who received two physically sub-standard issues of *Interzone* in a row. Many of you must have wondered what on earth was going on, and I don't blame you for doing so.

Secondly, to our writers, some of whose words were mangled. In Ian Lee's story "Pigs, Mostly" (IZ 50) the columns on page 36 were printed the wrong way round; also, some words were dropped from the lower part of the right-hand column on page 33—the sentence which reads, "Graham didn't notice that either, as you wouldn't notice a dormouse waking from winter were in," should read: "Graham didn't notice that either, as you wouldn't notice a dormouse waking from winter sleep in the far corner of the field you were in." There were many lesser errors in other stories and articles.

Thirdly, apologies to our longstanding typesetter **Bryan Williamson**, whose services we did without for two issues. We're glad to welcome him back: he is a thorough professional, and untrained amateurs with Apple Macintosh computers, whatever their artistic pretensions, can never match the skill of an experienced and pains-taking typesetter such as Bryan.

And if you're wondering who the artists were who illustrated issues 49 and 50...well, we can vouch for **Martin Perrott** and **Ben Mozar**, who drew the pictures for the stories "Something

to Beef About" and "The Long Journey of Frozen Heart" in issue 49, but all other internal illustrations in those two issues were done by a couple of members of Helter Skelter's staff. Apparently, they were insufficiently proud of their work to sign it. I remonstrated with them for putting pseudonyms ("Ginny Gordon," "Mick Marble") on their pictures in issue 49, and they responded by putting no names at all on the illustrations in issue 50. So, if readers wish to vote for or against any of their illustrations in this year's artists' popularity poll, best just refer to all these pictures as "by Helter Skelter."

THE RISE AND RISE OF INTERZONE

The July 1991 issue of *Locus* (the American "Newspaper of the Science Fiction Field") contains some good news for us. In *Locus*'s annual poll, *Interzone* has risen from fifth to fourth place in its readers' esteem. Only three sf magazines—*Asimov's*, *F & SF* and *Analog*, in that descending order—rate more highly than IZ among the readership of *Locus*. We've scored higher than *Aboriginal*, *Amazing* and *Omni*, among many other titles which have much larger circulations in the USA than we do, and we're pleased. Third place for IZ next year, perhaps? *Analog* had better watch out!

SEEING THE LIGHT

I have seen the light, I really have. We are living in a whole new era of history. The science fiction which I grew up on is now a thing of the past, one of the many curious literatures of our semi-remembered forebears. It's a whole new world out there now, and we should cease dreaming of stale times.

These thoughts are occasioned by **Penguin Books'** launch of their new "Roc" science-fiction and fantasy line, complete with a postal Roc Fantasy Fan Club headquartered at Harmondsworth, Middlesex. Remember *Penguin Books*, that once-great educational institution, a keeper of the nation's conscience along with the BBC? Eminent old-timers such as Professor Richard Hoggart (a scourge of all trivial literature) recall their orange-covered paperbacks with misty eyes.

As far as sf is concerned, *Penguin* used to publish H.G. Wells, Olaf Stapledon, Aldous Huxley, John Wyndham; and, during a brief heyday of the 1960s when Brian Aldiss was their

adviser and I was very young, they expanded their sf list (with great covers by famous surrealist artists) to include **Frederik Pohl**, **Theodore Sturgeon**, **Kurt Vonnegut**, **J.G. Ballard**, **Philip K. Dick** and many others. For some reason, the *Penguin* list declined gently during the 1970s and early 80s, but as recently as 1986 it still included occasional sf books of the calibre of **Bruce Sterling's** *Schismatrix*. One always felt that if *Penguin* had kept everything in print which they had ever published theirs could have been by far and away the best paperback sf list in the world.

But those were idle thoughts, because it's evident such stuff did not make money for them. Perhaps they realized that the boring old material was best left to brash interlopers such as **Panther/Granada/Grafton Books**. They decided instead to forge a deal with the American gaming company **TSR Hobbies**, and thus to create a bright new world of sf/fantasy literature. It worked! Their apparently lucrative relationship with **TSR** came to an end recently (new *TSR* fantasies are appearing from **Random Century's** Arrow Books), but this hasn't fazed *Penguin*, who are now reborn in the shape of "Roc Books." Their August 1991 launch titles include such juicy fantasy items as *Echoes of the Fourth Magic* by **R.A. Salvatore** and *Shadowrun: Choose Your Enemies Carefully* by **Robert N. Charrette**, not to mention *Temps*, a new "superhero" anthology series "devised by" our very own **Alex Stewart** and **Neil Gaiman**.

As I say, it's a new world: we can't beat it, so let's join it. Everyone just lie back and enjoy. (David Pringle)

Interaction

Dear Editors:

David Pringle takes the opportunity (*Interzone* 49, *Interface*) to defend the new "space operatics" of the younger generation of British sf authors and champion their supposed "rediscovery of the stars." Apart from the rather eccentric decision to use up limited editorial space in justification of work of already popular, award-winning and best-selling authors, the piece encapsulates an attitude to contemporary sf which this reader, for one, finds disturbing.

It is not enough, by way of pre-emptive self-criticism, to admit that these writers will be decried elsewhere as "neo-conservative" and "nostalgic." Mr Pringle's defensiveness merely confirms the accuracy of that judgement. Where he finds "exuberance" I suspect others besides myself will detect "retreat from issues," "fascination with technology at the expense of ideas," "failure of imagination," "unconscious parody" and "camp pastiche."

Mr Pringle offers, in support of his thesis, a potted history of British post-60s sf; but as Kim Stanley Robinson elegantly demonstrates elsewhere in the same issue, "history" is capable of sustaining multiple interpretations. Rather than admire these new writers, I believe we should rather dislike them: for their pandering to marketplace values; for their failure to resist intellectual colonization by the American ideology of technological optimism; and for their firm refusal to deal with anything approaching a live socio-economic or political issue (don't be controversial: controversy damages sales). All we have in place of the New Wave is what existed before the New Wave: a thin impersonation of American mainstream sf, Asimov-and-water. But then British sf writers have traditionally known which side their bread was buttered; the glory of the New Wave was that, briefly, we had a few writers in sf who didn't know their place, and for whom commercial considerations (in particular, cracking the lucrative American market) were not the *ne plus ultra*.

I find it particularly fatuous that the stars are once more our destination. Ballard was right: the future is here, now, on this planet and inside our heads. More to the point, it's likely to remain so: does anyone with any sense (i.e. outside NASA) really believe that "we" are going even to Mars? After the Challenger disaster and Helen Sharman's ludicrous "mission" (straight out of Barry Malzberg)? The reason that writers like Ballard were so widely disliked in the 60s was that their assumptions were at odds with the fantasies which sustained the typical sf fan (then, as now, male and adolescent in mind if not in body: the proverbial computer programmer). Briefly, it was OK to be adult and read sf; apparently in the 90s, it's *de rigueur* to revert.

To be frank, Mr Pringle, I don't much care if this is "real" sf: crap is crap, no matter how "intelligently written." If I want soap then I'll read the originals, which at least don't drive me into a frenzy of self-contempt: E.E. "Doc" Smith, Asimov, Clarke, Edgar Rice Burroughs et al. Better their vulgar naivety, which has its period charms, than this recrudescence of infantile compensatory fantasy, this (at its worst) faux-naivety of commercial calculation.

The Shelley who wrote Frankenstein, the Wells who wrote *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, the Huxley who wrote *Breve New World*, would despair if they could see what their pioneering explorations of sf's possibilities are leading to. What sf needs, quite desperately, is to grow up: not to regress to childhood. And if this means that it has to disappear as a separate genre – so be it. RIP sf?

Paul Bowes
Monchester

Dear Editors:

Your suggestion that British sf writers are once again writing space fiction because they've finally broken away from the deadening influence of the post-New Wave era sounds superficially plausible but on closer examination falls apart because of its inbuilt assumption that sf writers are only influenced by other sf writers, and pay no attention to what's going on elsewhere. It's much more likely that British sf writers are sloughing off the shrouds of pessimism and introspection and adopting a more upbeat mood than hitherto because the world itself is beginning to look a lot less gloomy. Do you recall a letter of mine published in *Interzone* about three years ago, in which I argued that the growth of fantasy (as opposed to science fiction) in the early and middle eighties was perhaps a product of the Cold War tensions that then engulfed the world: the sense, induced by the prospect that the arms race was slipping out of control and that nuclear war was inevitable, that it was pointless to write about the future for the simple reason that there would never be one?

Three years later, the Cold War between the superpowers is over, the arms race (despite Iraq) is winding down as nations discover that they can no longer sustain the economic distortions military expenditure imposes, prospects for resolving or at least containing the global environmental crisis are shifting closer and taking on greater depth and form – of course sf writers are likely to feel more optimistic, more inclined to send their protagonists out into space than maroon them in a decaying Home Counties landscape. Particularly British sf writers, who are closer to the former locus of superpower confrontation than their North American counterparts and so bound to respond more positively to the opportunities brought into focus by the fall of the Iron Curtain and the imminent reunification of Europe. (It's arguable that continuing attempts by US authors to restart the Cold War, as featured in practically every other one of your "Books Received" columns, owe as much to their geographical distance from Europe, and thus their inability to respond to its recovery of its identity, as it does to forty-odd years of

government-mediated mistrust of the Russians.)

On the other hand, though, isn't all this lifting off into space just as much a means of escape from the real world as the fantasy trilogies of a few years ago? The more real-world scientists and politicians discuss the so-called industrialization of space, the more unlikely it becomes, precisely because of its gargantuan cost – and the very long lead times before investors would see any returns would make ordinary multinational corporations concerned for their bottom line refuse point-blank to invest in the first place. Only national governments could afford it – but having almost wrecked their economies once through excessive military expenditure they'll be very cautious about almost wrecking them again by spending the even greater sums required for the mass colonization of space. Which means, bluntly, that if British sf writers are celebrating their release from the threat of nuclear war, and thus the opportunity to write about the future once again, they appear to be doing so not by engaging with the far more exciting and demanding terrain of the near future, but by taking refuge in a dream of the far future that they know will never come to pass.

Joseph Nicholas
London

Dear Editors:

Interzone 49 was an interesting issue. The first thing that caught my eye was David Pringle's editorial, lamenting the "gloomy and introspective" nature of British sf during the seventies and eighties. I had to smile slightly at what must be the most astonishing conversion since Saul on the road to Damascus; for many of us *Interzone* was the home of gloomy and introspective fiction and seemed to encourage just exactly the type of writing the dominance of which Pringle now bemoans. Of course, his conversion to a more upbeat, lighter, forward-looking type of sf is welcome, however belated, but I must point out that George Townsend, Sam Jeffers and myself at *Dream* have been writing editorials saying exactly the same thing for some years (e.g. my editorial in *Dream* 15, Spring 1988). Such opinions have, predictably, been much decried by those who profess to know just what it is sf should be. I look forward to the reaction now that *Interzone* appears to be looking towards some of the same goals.

As to your reply to Paul Campbell's letter, I think it misses the point somewhat. I don't think many people would want a special "sweetness and light" issue of *IZ* – at worst the idea smacks of a sop to those of us who are fed up with depression. What I personally

Continued on page 69



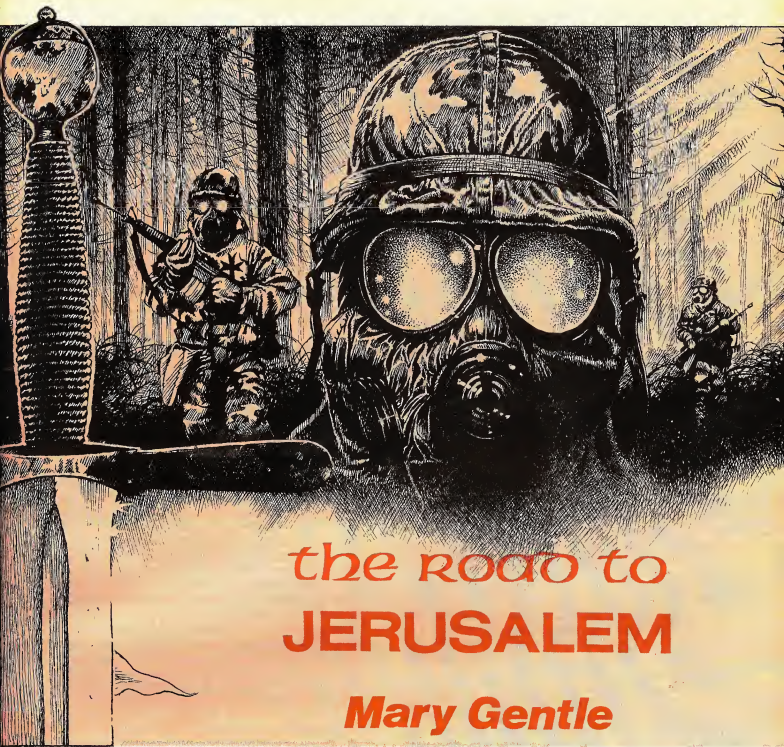
Banners cracked in the wind and the hot grass smelled of summer. Sweat stung Tadmartin's eyes. Long habit taught her the uselessness of clashing mail gauntlet against barrel-helm in an attempt to wipe her forehead. She blinked agitatedly.

Sun flashed off her opponent's flat-topped helm; that brilliance that gives mirror-finish plate the name of white harness. A momentary breeze blew through her visor. Unseen, she grinned. She cut the single-handed sword down sharply, grounding her opponent's blade under it in the dirt.

She slammed her shield against the opposing helm. "Concede?"

"Eat that, muther!"

Knowing Tysoe, Tadmartin's unseen grin widened. She slipped back into fighting-perception, apprehending with the limited peripheries of her vision all the tourney field (empty now, the formal contests down to this one duel), the ranked faces of the audience, the glitter of light from lenses. A soughing sound reached her, muffled through arming-cap and helm. Tournament cheers.



the road to **JERUSALEM**

Mary Gentle

Tysoe launched an attack. Tadmartin panted. Both moving slow now after long combat.

Strung out so tight, nothing real but the slide of sun down the blade, the whip of the wind coming in on her left side; foot sliding across the glass-slippery turf, heat pounding in her head. The body remembering at muscular level all the drills of training. Tadmartin moved without thought, without intention.

She felt her hand slide on the grip, the blade's weight cut the air — Tysoe's two-handed sword smashed down, parried through with her shield, her own blade

cutting back; Tysoe's wild leap to avoid the belly cut — all slowed by her perceptions so that she watched it rather than willed it. Felt her body twist, rise; bring the thirty-inch blade back up and round and over in a high cut. Metal slammed down between Tysoe's neck and shoulder. The impact stung her hand.
"Shit!"

Tysoe dropped to one knee. Now only one hand held the greatsword; the other arm hung motionless. Tadmartin stepped in on the instant, footwork perfect, sword up:

Illustrations by Martin McKenna

"Yield or die, sucker!"

"Aw, shit, man! Okay, okay. I yield. I yield!"

Tadmartin held the position, shield out, sword back in a high single-handed grip, poised for the smash that – rebated blade or not – would shatter Tysoe's skull. Through the narrow visor she caught the lift of the marshal's flag. A sharp drum sounded. Instantly she stepped back, put down the shield, slipped the sword behind her belt, and reached up to unfasten the straps of the barrel-helm.

"You broke my fuckin' arm!"

"Collarbone." Tadmartin pulled off the helm, shaking her bobbed yellow hair. Sound washed in on her: the shouting and cheering from the stands, the shrill trumpets. A surgeon's team doubled across the arena towards them.

"Collarbone," Tadmartin repeated. "Hey, you want to use an out-of-period weapon, that's your problem. That two-hander's slow."

"It's got reach. Aw, and you, man."

Tadmartin held the barrel-helm reversed under her arm. Casually she stripped the mail gauntlets off and dropped them into the helm. She shook her head, corn-hair blazing against the blue sky. Conscious now of the weight of belted mail, hugging her body from neck to knee; and the heat of the arming doublet under it, despite the white surcoat reflecting back the sun.

"Tysoe, babe." She knelt, and put her helm down; awkward with the blunt sword shoved through her belt; reached in and undid the straps and buckles holding Tysoe's barrel-helm on. The steel burned her bare fingers. Gently she pulled the helm loose. Tysoe's arming-cap came away with it, and her brown hair, rattled into clumps by sweat, spiked up in a ragged crest. The woman's bony face was bright scarlet.

"Shit, why don't it never rain on Unification Day?"

"That'd be too easy." She loosened the taller woman's surcoat. Tysoe swore as the belt released the weight of the mail coat, and leaned back on the turf. "They're going to have to cut that mail off you, girl. No way else to get to that fracture."

Disturbed, Tysoe said, "Aw, sod it. That's my hauberk, man. Shit."

"Gotta go. See you after."

The drum cut out. Music swelled from the speakers: deliberate Military Romantic. Tadmartin, not needing the Marshall's guidance, walked across the worn turf of the stadium towards the main box. Breath caught hot in her throat. The weariness not of one fight, but of a day's skirmishing in the heat, knotted her chest. The muscles of her legs twinged. Bruises ached; and one sharp pain in a finger she now identified as a possible fracture. She walked head high, trying to catch what breeze the July day might have to offer.

The PA blared: "– the tournament winner, Knight-lieutenant Hyacinthe Tadmartin –"

It's PR, she reminded herself. The Unification Day tournament; blunt weapons; a show; that's *all*. Aw, but fuck it, I don't care.

The applause lifted, choking her. She walked alone; a compact woman with bright hair, looking up at the main box. A few of the commanders' faces were identifiable; and her own Knight-captain with the white surcoat over black-and-brown DPMs. Tadmartin

saluted with all the accuracy left to her. The steel mail hauberk robbed her of breath in the suffocating heat. She plodded up the steps to the platform.

Spy-eyes and bio-reporters crowded close as Marshal Philippe de Molay, in white combat fatigues with the red cross on the breast, stood and saluted her. He spoke less to her than to the media:

"Knight-lieutenant Tadmartin. Again, congratulations. You stand for the highest Templar ideal: the protection of the weak and innocent by force of arms. The ideal that sustained our grand founder Jacques de Molay, when the Unholy Church's Inquisition subjected him to torture, and would have given him a traitor's death at the stake. The ideal that enabled us to reform the Church from within, so that now our relationship with the Reformed Pope at Avignon is one of the pillars upon which the Order of the Knights Templar stands. While there are women and men like you, we stand upon a secure foundation. And while we stand upon the past, we can reach out and claim the future."

Tadmartin at last gave in to a long desire: she smeared her hand across her red and sweating face, then wiped it down her surcoat. The grin wouldn't stay off her face. "Thank you, *sieur*."

"And how long have you been in the Order, lieutenant?"

"Seven years, *sieur*."

Questions came from the spy-eyes then, released to seek whatever sightbites might be useful for the news networks. Tadmartin's grin faded. She answered with a deliberate slowness, wary in front of camcorders and Virtual recorders. Yes, from a family in Lesser Burgundy, all her possessions signed over to the Order; yes, trained at the academy in Paris; no, she didn't watch the Net much, so her favourite programmes –

A blonde woman, one eye masked by a head-up Virtual Display, shoved her way between Tadmartin and the Marshall of the Templar Order. Philippe de Molay's long face never changed but his body-language radiated annoyance.

"Knight-lieutenant Tadmartin," the young woman said, with a precise Greater Burgundian accent. "Louise de Keroac: I have you on realtime for Channel Nine. Knight-lieutenant Tadmartin, will you confirm that you were in charge of the company responsible for the Roanoke massacre?"

5 July 1991

One estate over, the houses and the cars are newer and there's more space between everything. Here the cars are old, knocked about, and parked bumper-to-bumper. Heat shimmers off pavements. Terraces and semis shoulder each other. Pavement trees droop, roots covered in dogshit.

"Hey, Tad!"

Both Hook and Norton wear old Disruptive Pattern Material combat trousers, the camouflage light brown on dark brown; and Para boots. Hook's hair is shaved down to brown fuzz. Norton grinds out a cigarette against the wall.

"So what about the Heckler & Koch."

Tad ruffles Norton's hair; he catches her arm; she breaks the grip. Time was when bunking off school left them conspicuous in the empty day. Now there are enough anomalies – unemployed, sick, retired,

re-training – that they merge. Tad with braided hair, jeans; pockets always full.

“Caseless ammo. Eleven millimetre. This one really works. Low penetration, high stopping power – they want to use it for terrorist sieges.”

Tad knows. She can remember the excitement of knowing the litany of technology. The skill in knowing all measurements, all details; all the results of firing trials. She can remember when it was all new.

Tad and Hook end up in Norton's house, watching films on the old VCR. The living-room smells of milk and sick, and there are dog-hairs on the couch. Someone – Norton's older sister, probably – has left a clutch of empty and part-empty lager cans on the floor, along with stubbed-out cigarettes.

“So what's he say?”

“About training camp?”

Tad snorts. “Of course about training camp.” Norton's brother is in the forces, and sent somewhere we don't talk about. Not if we want Norton's brother to remain the healthy, brutal, nineteen-year-old that they remember him.

“He says he nearly couldn't hack it.”

There is an awed pause: Norton's brother transformed from the squaddie in uniform to the sixteen-year-old that Tad remembers from summers ago. Word came back to Tad that Norton's brother and his mate done a runner from basic training; later she will know this is not true. Not and stay in the forces. Which Norton's brother does for five years – until, in fact, some New Amsterdam paramilitary unit fires a rocket launcher at a garrison. The rocket goes literally between the two squaddies on Norton's brother's truck, giving both of them a bad case of sunburn: injuries from the rocket-motor. Norton's brother is inside talking to the on-duty watch, and there isn't anything of him left to find.

Tad, two years from knowing this, says, “But did you ask him?”

“Yeah. He says you'll get in. They'll take you.”

Norton goes quiet after this. Hook prods him with one of the endless arguments about the stunts in the aerial sequences of *Top Gun*. Tad sprawls against the broken sofa. She is among clutter: a folded pushchair, someone's filthy work jacket, Tonka toys. She makes three separate efforts to join the argument and they exclude her. She feels bewilderment and hurt.

Remembering that hurt, it comes to her that they shut her out because they can see what she, at that moment, still cannot. That she will be the one to do what they never will – follow Norton's brother.

And more, that she has always meant to do this.

“I have nothing to say.”

The blonde woman spy-eye persisted. “You were at Roanoke, Knight-lieutenant? You were at Roanoke at the time when the incident took place?”

Tadmartin let her face go blank. “Nothing to say. You can talk to my company commander, demzelle Keroac. I have no comment.”

“Will you admit to being on service in the New World at that time?”

“You can't expect a junior officer to comment on troop movements,” Philippe de Molay said smoothly. Thank you, lieutenant Tadmartin.”

She saluted smartly. Shoulder and arm muscles shrieked protest, stiffening after exercise. She about-faced, trod smartly down the steps; heard the woman's voice raised in protest behind her as the security detail closed in.

Lights and camcorders crowded her face as she stepped off the platform into a crowd of reporters.

“Just a few words, Knight-lieutenant –”

“– you think of the European Unification –”

“– opinion on the story breaking in New Amsterdam; please, Ms Tadmartin?”

She knew better than to react. Still, New Amsterdam in that colonial accent made her blink momentarily. She looked between jostling bodies and memorized the face of a tall man, wispy-haired, with a tan skin that argued long Western service or Indo-Saracen blood.

“And your view of the Order's investment holdings in the New World –?”

She wiped her wrist across her nose and grinned at him, sweaty, breath eased from the long combat “It isn't my business to have financial or political opinions, *sieur*. If you'll excuse me, I have duties to attend to.”

Voices broke out, trying for a final question, but her patience and control ran on thin threads now.

“Yo, Tysoe!” She broke free and jogged across the field to the surgeon's van. The large, gawky woman waved her uninjured arm, beaming groggily through pain-suppressants.

“Wow, man. You look pissed off. What did they give you, six months' hard labour?”

Tadmartin heaved the buckle of her belt tighter, gaining more support for the mail hauberk. Disentangling herself from mail was an undignified operation – arse-skyward and wriggling – that mostly required help, and she was damned if she'd do it for an audience on the network. She swung herself up to sit on the van's hard bench seats. The orderlies snapped Tysoe's stretcher in place. Tadmartin saw they were ordinary grunts.

“I'll go back to base with you,” she stated, and pointed at one of the orderlies. “You! Get my squad leader on the radio. I want him to supervise the clear-up detail here. I said now, soldier.”

“Yessir – ma'am!” Tysoe said, in a broad Lesser Burgundian accent. “Boy, are you pissed off. What happened?”

“I'll tell you what happened, Knight-lieutenant Tysoe.”

Tadmartin leaned back against the rail as the van coughed into gear. The sun slanted into the stadium, ranked faces still awaiting the final speeches that she need not sit through; and a granular gold light informed the air. She wiped the sweat-darkened hair back from her face.

“Someone wanted to interview me about Roanoke.”

Tysoe grunted. Pain-suppressants allowed a shadow of old grief or guilt to change her expression.

“That was settled. That was accounted for.”

“No,” Tadmartin said. “No.”

5 July 1992

Tad hits cover at the side of the track, body pressed into the bank. Her body runs with sweat. She stinks of woodsmoke survival fires.

Listening so hard she can hear the hum of air in the canals of her ears. She risks a glance back. She can't see the four men in her squad who are down the track behind her – which is how it should be. They can see her. Their responsibility to watch for silent signals.

Looking up the track, she can see Tysoe, Shule, and Warner flattened into bushes and behind trees. On ceaseless watch, Tysoe catches her eye: taps hand to shoulder in the sign for officer and pats the top of her head, come to me. Tad immediately slips up to join her.

"We've got to move up. What's the problem?"

Tysoe: all knees and elbows, face plump with puppy-fat. She shrugs. "Warner and Shule. You put them on point. They keep going into cover."

"Jesu Sophia!" Tad, bent double, dodges tree-to-tree as far as Shule, who's belly-down behind soft cover. "For fuck's sake move!"

"The scouts –"

"Just fucking move!"

She picks up Shule bodily by the collar, throwing him forward. He opens his mouth to protest. She slams her rifle-butt against the back of his helmet. His head hits the ground. He and Warner move off. She signals the squad forward in file, settling in behind point, shoving Shule on every ten or fifteen yards. Too late to change point now: Tysoe would have been better, but she needs Tysoe as her other team leader, so – command decision.

At low volume she thumbs the RT. Out-of-date equipment, like so much else here. "Sierra Zero Eight, this is Oscar Foxtrot Nine. Give sit-rep, repeat, sit-rep. Over."

No voice acknowledges. The waveband crackles.

"Sierra Zero Eight, do you copy?"

White noise.

"Fuck." She looks back to catch Tysoe's eye, signals close up and move faster; slides the rifle down into her hands and jogs off at Shule's heels. The kevlar jacket weighs her down; her feet throb in her boots; and the assault rifle could be made from lead for all she knows.

Running, she can hear nothing.

The forest is a mess of brushwood, high trees, spatter-sunlight that's a gift to camouflage; noisy leaves, her own harsh breath in her ears; sweat, anxiety, frustration. Her eight-man squad moves tactically from cover to cover, but all of it soft cover. No time to check her watch but she knows they've exhausted all the time allowed for this flanking attack and then some.

"Fuck it!" She skids to a halt, signals cover and beckons Tysoe. The young woman spits as she hits cover beside Tad.

"What?"

There should be silent signals for all of this: she's forgotten them.

"We haven't got time for this! We're leaving the track. I'm taking them down through the wood; we'll come out above the camp and take them from there. Pass it back."

She hears Tysoe go back as she moves forward to Warner and Shule. The woods are still. Not a crack of branch. And no firing from down by the base-camp. Nothing. A hundred square miles and there could be no one else there...

"Move!" she repeats, throwing Warner forward

bodily. He stumbles into the brush. Giving up, she takes point; ducking to avoid snagging her pack on branches. One look behind assures her Tysoe – thank God for Tysoe! – is taking the back door and moving the squad up between them by sheer will.

Sacrificing tactics for speed, she cuts down a steep pine slope, over needles and broken branches; pauses once to thumb the RT and hear nothing but white noise; hits a remembered gully and slides down into it, feeding Warner and Shule and Ragald on and past her.

Just turned sixteen, Tad is not yet grown; a young woman with her hair under the too-large helmet shaved down to bootcamp fuzz. She hooks her neckerchief up to cover her mouth and nose and crawls down the gully, placing each of the eight-man squad at intervals.

Now she can hear voices, or is the fool-the-ear silence of the Burgundian woods? Let it ride, let it ride... and yes: a voice. The crackle of a voice over an RT, muted, a good twenty-five yards over the far rim of the gully. She gives the thumbs-down for enemy seen or suspected, points direction, holds up three fingers for distance. Looking down the line, she sees Tysoe grinning. All of them acknowledge. Even Shule's smartened up.

Eight sixteen-year-olds in soaked and muddy combats, weighed down with packs and helmets, assault rifles ready.

She signals *stealth* approach.

Up to the edge of the gully, assault rifle cradled across her forearms, moving in the leopard-crawl. One hand lifting twigs out of her way; not resting a knee until she knows the ground is clear underneath.

Concussive explosion shatters the air. The rapid stutter of fire: still so noisy that she hardly believes it. She flattens down to the turf, the camp spread out below her, anyone who so much as glances up from the APCs and tents can see her –

The basecamp grunts are hitting dirt and hitting cover behind the gate barrier. Tad grins. There goes the diversionary attack, in on the gate. Blanks, loud and stinking.

She jerks her arm forward, and the dummy grenades go in; then the squad, charging, yelling, running as if they carried no weight at all. Firing on automatic.

Tad never sees the end of it.

A stray paint-pellet rips open across her stomach, splattering her scarlet. It is assumed the attacking grunts' blanks mostly miss. It is established that the training sergeants' pellet guns rarely do. The impact bruises. Tad goes down.

The wilderness training range echoes with gunfire, shouts, radio communications, orders, pyrotechnic explosions. She lies on her back. Men and women run past her. A smoke grenade goes off. Orange smoke drifts between the trees. Tad, with what she assumes for convenience's sake to be her last conscious effort, puts on her respirator. The choking smoke rolls over her. The firing continues.

An hour later, exhausted, dirty, hungry; Tad calculates that, within the confines of this exercise, the medic team failed to reach her before she became a fatality. She resigns herself to latrine duties.

"Sieur Tadmartin."

She grins. "Sarge."

The sergeant kicks the foodpack out of her hands; she's up, outraged; he hits her fist-then-elbow across the face. "You're a dead grunt – sieur. Why? I'll tell you why. Because you're a shit-stupid, dumbass excuse for a soldier. What are you?"

"A shit-stupid dumbass excuse for a soldier." Sergeants run armies; she is not, even at sixteen and in officer training, stupid enough to answer back the company sergeant.

"And just why are you a shit-stupid dumbass excuse for a soldier, Tadmartin? Speak up! These people want to hear you."

"Don't know, sergeant."

This time she sees it coming. When his fist cracks across her face her nose begins to leak dark blood.

"Because you set up an opportunity and you blew it. You took your people in like fucking cowboys. Next time you start a stealth attack you keep it up until you're in charge distance, you don't fucking waste it, you pathetic bitch, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sergeant."

"Coming in from the gully was good. You weren't spotted at all until you broke cover. Not," he raised his voice to include the trainees guarding the base, "that that should particularly surprise me, since none of you fuck-stupid officers can see your asses without a map and searchlight. Now you're going to clean up the area and then you might eat. Move, it!"

The next day they repeat the exercise.

And the next.

The mess hall still had the smell of new buildings about it. Pre-stressed concrete beams, plastic benches, tables bolted to the floor; all new. Only the silence was old. Tadmartin, changed back into the white fatigues of a Knight-lieutenant, ate with the Sergeant Preceptors in the familiar silence. She fell into it as she fell into combat-perception; easily, as a body slides into deep water.

The bell for meal's end sounded.

"Knight Brothers and Sergeants of the Convent. Every perfect gift comes from above, coming down from the Father of Lights and the Mother of Wisdom, Christ and Sophia, with whom there is no change nor shadow of alteration."

The frère at the lectern cleared his throat, addressing the grunts in the main body of the room.

"The reading today is from the bull of Pope Innocent-Fidelia. 'For by nature you were children of wrath, given up to the pleasures of the flesh, but now through grace you have left behind worldly shows and your own possessions; you have humbly walked the hard road that leadeth to life; and to prove it you have most conscientiously taken up the sword and sworn on your breasts the sign of the living cross, because you are especially reckoned to be members of the Knighthood of God.'"

Tadmartin sat easily erect on the hard bench. Sunlight slanted down from the clerestory windows on shaven heads, DPM fatigues. The smell of baking bread drifted out from the kitchens: the esquires and confrères working in silence except for the clatter of pans.

The words slid over her and she busied herself remembering equipment maintenance and duty rosters; found herself looking down at her hands in her

lap: short-nailed, calloused, and with a perceptible tremor.

The bell took her by surprise. She rose, saluting with the rest, about-faced and marched out.

"Tad." Tysoe, arm strapped, fell into step beside her. "You know where the rest of the company are now?"

"They were split up." She didn't break stride.

"We should talk."

"No." She walked off without looking back at the taller woman.

Once in her quarters, she ripped the top off a can of lager, drank, and vocalized the code for network access. The cell's viewscreen lit up with the public channel logo.

"Search Tadmartin," she said morosely. "Then search Roanoke. Backtime forty-eight hours."

The small viewscreen beeped and signalled a recorded sequence. Green leaves. Shells: the flat thud of one-of-fives. A soundtrack:

"Here in Cabotsland, in the Indo-Saracen states, gunfire is an everyday sound. Terrorist explosions mingle with the artillery barrages of brushfire wars between settlements. For generations there has been no peace."

The shot pulled back to show a spy-eye reporter standing below the walls of Raleighstown. Sun, swamp, forest, and mosquitoes. Tadmartin smiled crookedly. The reporter was a blonde woman in her twenties, eye masked by head-up Virtual Display.

"This is Louise de Keroac on Channel Nine, at Raleighstown. Centuries of settlement – our reformed Gnostic Saracen settlements imposed on the indigenous Indian population – have brought about not the hoped-for melting-pot of civilization, but a constant boil of war for land and hunting rights. The Crusades suppress this temporarily. But, as we all know, even if governments are reluctant to admit it, after the troops are withdrawn, the fighting breaks out again."

The woman's visible eye was a penetrating blue. She spoke with a breathy, cynical competence. Tadmartin raised the can to her mouth and drank, the alcohol pricking its way down her throat. She raised a thoughtful eyebrow. The alcohol combatted the cell's official 55°F.

De Keroac's voice sharpened:

"But Roanoke is different. Roanoke: our oldest successful settlement in the New World. Five years after the unexplained deaths of fifty-three civilians, as well as fourteen Knights Templar and thirty-three Knights Hospitaller, here in Roanoke, rumours continue to grow of a quasi-official shoot-on-sight policy. None of the soldiers wounded in that battle have ever been available for interview. Official sources have always spoken of 'surprise heathen attacks.' But now, finally, New Amsterdam is demanding an official enquiry."

A shot of the shitty end of the settlement; Tadmartin recognized it instantly. In the arms of a great forest, dwarfed by trees, the wooden buildings hug the ground by the river. The palisade fence winds off out of shot. The stone crenellations of the Templar castle came into shot as de Keroac's spy-eye panned.

Tadmartin rested her chin on her chest as she slumped back, watching Raleighstown. Bustling, full of men and women in short flowing robes and buckskin leggings, veils drawn up over their

mouths against the mosquitoes and the White Fever. Crowded market stalls, with old petrol-engine taxis hooting against herded buffalo in the streets; women with children on their hips; the glitter of sun off low-rise office blocks. The camera caught Franks go home! and To Eblis with Burgundy! grafted on one wooden wall.

"This is the garrison. The locals call it the garrison of the Burgundian Empire —"

Tadmartin groaned.

"... rather than that of United Europe. Whether partisan attack, terrorist bombs, or one lunatic with a grudge was responsible for the destruction of half its troops has never been known. Now, however, new evidence has appeared."

"It's the sakkies." A man leaned up against the door of Tadmartin's cell. Tall, young, broad-shouldered; and with the Turcoplier's star on his collar.

"Yo, Vitry."

"Yo." He stubbed out a thin black cigarette against the concrete wall and walked in. "That one's all bullshit. You want Channel Eight realtime."

"Eight," Tadmartin said. The video channel flicked obediently.

"— ever-present knowledge that the European governments could bomb them back into the Stone Age." A bio-reporter looked to camera: the man with the faded skin, Indo-Saracen blood. "Talk to the Templar grunts and sergeants. They call them sakkies. Their word for Saracen. No one I've spoken to will believe that a small paramilitary group of sakkies could destroy a trained Knightly garrison —"

"Bollocks." Vitry squatted beside Tadmartin's armchair and reached for her can of lager. "Every damn local regime gets lucky some time or another. We all know that. And that's the answer he'll have got. Lying bastard."

"... attempted to talk to the winner of this year's Unification Tourney; the lieutenant who, as a junior officer, found herself in charge of this Burgundian frontier outpost; Knight-lieutenant Hyacinthe Tadmartin."

She regarded the screen morosely, watching the stadium from a different angle than the combatants saw. Dust covered the melee in the main field. Vitry peered closely at the screen.

"There's you — and there's me, look!" He lifted his voice without looking away from the screen. "Yo! You guys! We're on the network!"

"Jesu Sophia!"

She watched herself walk down the steps from the main box. The mail hauberk glittered and the stained surcoat's red cross blazed. The camera zoomed in and held the image of her face: oval, youthful until the eyes. The Knighthood of God. She thought that she looked both older and younger than twenty-six: fitter in body than most, but with weathered crows-feet around her eyes.

She snapped her fingers to mute audio, not being able to stand the sound of her own voice; bringing it up again only when the camera cut back to the bio-reporter.

"Hiding within the strict rules of the Templars — a Templar frère may never 'disclose the House,' that is, give out information on Templar activities, on penalty of losing their place within the Knighthood — hiding

under this cover, no one can cross-examine this member of Burgundy's most elite force —"

"Yo!" Vitry roared. "That's one for the Hospitallers. We're the most elite force!"

The rest of the mess, crowding Tadmartin's narrow cell, swore at or yelled with Vitry according to temperament.

"— no one can even establish who did command at Roanoke; even less what happened there, and why. Moves are being made to take this to the High Council of Burgundy when it meets with Pope Stephen-Maria V in Avignon later today. But will the truth, even then, be brought to light?"

"This is James de Craon, for Channel Eight —"

Talk broke out, the Templars dispersing back to the mess.

"Ah well. Bullshit baffles brains." Vitry shrugged. "You never had an overseas posting as far north as Roanoke, did you?"

Since it was not a question Tadmartin felt no obligation to give an answer. She snapped her fingers to kill audio and video. As the crowd moved away from her door, a grunt anxiously saluted her. She returned it.

"Yes?"

"Message from Commander St Omer, sieur. He'll see you in his office at oh-six-hundred hours tomorrow morning."

5 July 1994

"**F**ine brother knights." The Preceptor Philippe de Molay clears his throat and continues to read. "*Biaus se'gnors frères*, you see that the majority have agreed that this woman should be made a frère. If there be someone amongst you who knows reason why she should not be, then speak."

The dawn sun hits the mirror-windows of Greater Burgundian office blocks and reflects back, slanting down through ogee arches into the chapel, failing to warm the biscuit-coloured stone. Tad, at attention, can just see her instructors — in formal black or brown surcoats — to either side of her. The stone is bitter cold under her bare feet. The Preceptor's voice echoes flatly.

"You who would be knightly, you see us with fine harness, you see us eat well and drink well, and it therefore appears your comfort with us will be great."

And so it does appear to Tadmartin, used now to being provided with combat fatigues, formal uniforms, assault rifle, all the technology of communication and destruction.

"But it is a hard thing that you, who are your self's master, should become the serf of another, and this is what will be. If you wish to be on land this side of the ocean, you will be sent to the other; if you wish to be in New Amsterdam, you will be sent to Londres ... Now search your heart to discover whether you are ready to suffer for God."

One does not go through the specialist training — the suffering for man? Tad wonders — to refuse at this late stage. But some have. When it comes to it, some have refused in this very ceremony.

Outside, the deep blue sky shines. She can hear them drilling, down on the square. Voices, boots. Here in the cold chapel, the commander and turcopliers in

their robes stand side-by-side with the medic and psychologist—to certify her fitness—and the solicitor.

"...Now I have told you the things that you should do, and those you should not; those that cause loss of the House, and those that cause loss of the habit; and if I have not told you all, then you may ask it, and may God grant you to speak well and do well."

"God wills it," Tadmartin says soberly, "that I hear and understand."

"Now your instructors may speak."

De Payens is first. A short, dark-haired woman; worn into service; a sergeant who will do nothing else but train now, although Tad knows she has been offered command of her own House.

De Payens' warm voice says: "She passed basic training at 89% and advanced training at 93%. We consider this acceptable."

Six o'clock mornings, runs, workouts, assault courses; field-stripping weapons and field-stripping your opponent's psychology; all of this in her memory as de Payens smiles.

"Advanced strategic and tactical studies," St Omer concedes, "85%, which we accept."

"Combat experience," de Charney's voice comes from behind her. "No more errors than one might expect with a green lieutenant. I don't give percentages. Christ and Sophia! She's here, isn't she? And so are her squad."

The Preceptor frowns at that, but Tad doesn't notice. The cold of the chapel becomes the cold of fear. Brown-adrenalin fear, and the boredom and the routine; and the training that takes over and takes her through rough southern days fighting mercenaries on the Gold Coast.

The Preceptor commands, "Appear naked before God."

Her fingers are cold, fiddling with the combat fatigues, and it is a long moment before she strips them off and stands naked. The chill of the stone reverberates back from walls and weapon-racks and the altar crowned with the image of St Baphomet. Her skin goosepimples. She has learned to ignore it, resting easy in her body, unselfconscious with their eyes on her.

The Preceptor, de Molay, searches her face as if there is something he could discover. Waiting long minutes until the other Templars stir impatiently.

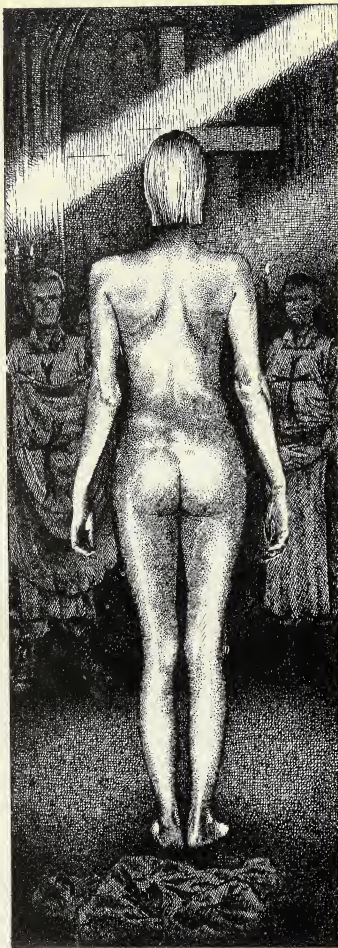
At last he asks, "Do you wish to be, all the days of your life, servant and slave of the house?"

She meets his gaze. "Yes, if God wills, sieur."

"Then be it so."

He doesn't look away. She takes the white livery with the red cross from de Payens, who helps her rapidly dress; she signs the document the solicitor gives her, assigning all possessions now and for her lifetime to the Order; she takes the congratulations of the officers relaxing into informal talk. All the time, de Molay's eyes are on hers.

She does not — cannot — ask him what he sees. Woman, frère, special forces soldier; none seem quite to account for that look. As if, before the altar of God, he sees in her what God does not.



"R"oanoke was Border country, sieur."

"You might as well say bandit country and be done with it," St Omer spoke quietly and rationally, not looking at her. "It's still a devil of a long way from being an explanation."

"I know that, *sieur*."

A truck rumbled past outside the window. The dew was still on the tarmac of the camp; grunts doubling across wide avenues to kitchen and latrine duties. Tadmartin ignored her griping stomach. The commander's office smelled of photocopier fluid. Three of the six telephones on his desk blinked for attention.

"Emirate Cabotsland..." Knight-Commander St Omer sighed. "I'm formally warning you, Knight-lieutenant, that it may become necessary for an enquiry to be held."

"Permission to speak, *sieur*."

The middle-aged man responded tiredly. "Speak as God bids you."

"The Roanoke House already held such an inquiry, *sieur*. Report dated 10 July 1997. You can access it above rank of captain, *sieur*."

Tadmartin stared at a middle-distance spot six inches to the left of the commander's eyes, wondering what particular circumstances had left him manning a desk while other, younger knights gained field promotions... She steered herself away from seeing her image mirrored in him.

"You misunderstand me," St Omer corrected. "It may become necessary to hold a public enquiry. I suspect that that's what Avignon will come to, ultimately. You're to hold yourself in readiness for that event, and, if it should come about, act in all things in accordance with your vows of obedience to us."

Tadmartin stared. Caught, for the first time in five years, unprepared. She dropped her usual pretence of just-another-grunt-*sieur* and responded as Templars do. "They can't ask me to disclose the house!"

"Normally, no, but his Holiness Stephen-Maria may release you from that vow. Publicly."

"That - *sieur*, excuse me, even his Holiness can't reverse a vow made before God and the chapter!"

St Omer stood and walked to the window. He remained facing it, a black silhouette against brightness. Tadmartin returned to staring rigidly ahead.

"The magister Templi requires me to inform you, Knight-lieutenant, that - if necessary - you will answer questions on the secret history. Is that clear? Of course," the level voice added, "what you perceive as a necessity will prove of interest to us all."

Maps of Cabotsland's settled east coast on the walls, satellite photos of its Shogunate west coast; network terminals, old mugs half-full of coffee: the commander's office is one Tadmartin has often stood in, on many different bases. And there are the insignia on the walls, of course. Banners of campaigns. Some traditions do not die.

"You'll leave at oh-nine-hundred for Avignon; you will be accompanied at all times by a security detail; you will report to me immediately on your return. Go with God. Dismissed."

5 July 1995

Tadmartin hefts the sword in her hand. It's lighter than she expects, no more than two or three pounds. A yard-long blade, a short cross-guard, a brazilnut-shapedommel.

This is a live blade. Bright, it nonetheless has the patina of age on its silver. But a live blade, with a razor edge, and it slides through the air as slick as oil. It flies, it dives. The weight of it moves her wrist in

the motions for attack, parry and block.

"And that's the difference." The combat instructor takes it back from her reluctant hand. He replaces it in the weapons rack. The sun from the gymnasium window lights his sand-coloured, whitening hair.

She wants to hold it, to wield it again. She has the height and strength now of adulthood; a woman of slightly less than medium height, with strong shoulders. She wears new white combats, with the Templar red cross above the breast pocket.

"You, however, are going to use this for today."

He hands her, single-handed, a greatsword.

Two-handed grip, wide cross, forty-four inch blade. Tadmartin takes it, coming into guard position: the balance is good. But it weighs as much again as the single-hander.

Probably her body-language broadcasts impatience: she would rather be out on the ranges. Possibly he has had to deal with other recruits to the House of Solomon. The instructor, Sevrey, shifts into combat speed; and she is left defenceless, holding the grip in sweating hands, as his blade swings to cut at face, belly, groin: the blunt edge barely touching the cloth of her combats each time as he stops it. Ten, twenty blows.

"It's a discipline. The Templar discipline."

A yard of steel, rebated or not, is an iron bar that can break and crush. She freezes - after all her training, freezes, like any green conscript or civilian - and the blade flashes back brilliance.

"We've never broken this tradition. From the first Holy Land until now." He stops, sudden but smooth: he is not breathing any more strenuously. When he wields the sword he becomes something other than a forgettable-faced sergeant. The sword and the body are one.

"It's what we are."

She has seen him fight. Nothing of grace in it, unless it is the grace of chopping wood or driving stakes; the whole body weighing into the movement.

"I'll teach you," Sevrey says. "At the moment you're thinking about it. Where's the blade coming from, how do I move to parry, can I block that, where shall I attack? Train. Train and practise."

"And then?"

As he speaks she moves out onto the mat, gripping the sword, swinging it through the drill movements of parry and blow. Sometimes the blade is inert. Sometimes it moves like running water.

"Sword and intention."

She will understand intellectually but not in her gut. That comes later. With some it never comes at all.

"The sword is not part of you. You have an intention to use it," Sevrey moves out onto the mat with her. They circle. She watches, watches his eyes, the blade. Later she will learn not to watch any particular point in her field of vision, but to see it all, central and peripheral, simultaneously.

"First comes no-sword," Sevrey says. His blade comes out of nowhere, feints; she pulls back from a parry and his sword connects firmly across her stomach. An inch and a half behind the peritoneal wall coil thirty yards of intestine, and how much pressure does it take on a razor-edge to split muscle?

"No-sword: when the sword becomes an extension of yourself. You don't move the sword. You and the sword move."

She flips the blade back, lets the weight carry it over; and he cuts behind her cut and parries her through, the steel clashing in the echoing gymnasium.

"And then—" the first break in his stream of words as he almost follows her feint; gets back in time to block—"if you're good, then no-intention. You'll have done so much fighting that in combat you don't even think, you don't even see an opening. You just watch the sword come down and cut home—it'll seem slow to you. No-sword, no-intention. But for that you're going to have to spend a lot of time at it, or be naturally good, or both."

If he says more, she doesn't hear, the fight speeds up now. Combat speed.

In three months she will find herself fighting in this same gym, in a multiple melee; she will—and she only realizes it after the moment, and stands still in mid-combat and is cut down easily—strike down one opponent to her right and, in a reverse movement, block a stroke coming at her from behind with a perfect glissade. Nothing of it conscious. Nothing. But to the end of her days she will hear that back attack connect with her blocking blade, and hear Sevre's profane astonishment at her getting it there.

Air-conditioning hummed in the room without windows.

His Holiness Stephen-Maria V sat at the center of the horseshoe-shaped table. He intently watched a small monitor, resting his chin on his gloved hand. Two priests stood in readiness behind his chair. Incense drifted from their censers, whitening the corners of the room and smelling of sandalwood.

Tadmartin came to attention the prescribed three yards in front of the table and knelt, bowing her head. The heavy material of her white surcoat draped the floor. She noted with detachment the shoes of the others seated at the horseshoe-table: officers' boots, politicians' shoes, and the fashionably-impractical footwear of the media. Everything impinges itself on the detachment of combat-vision.

"Rise, demzelle."

She rose easily. Only her eyes moved, checking the faces. Civil servants. Priests. Mostly unknown: these would be the power-brokers, and not the men put there for show. Military: the heads of the Templar and Hospitaller Orders. And two other known faces—Channel Eight and Channel Nine seated side by side, all rivalry gone; James de Craon bending his ruddy countenance on her blind side as Louise de Keroac murmured some comment.

Outwardly calm, Tadmartin waited.

"I think we may offer the demzelle a chair, don't you?" His Holiness Stephen-Maria glanced at one of the dark-suited men on his right.

"I prefer to stand, sieur."

Outside the claustrophobic secure room, Avignon's baroque avenues and domed cathedrals shone with rain, the last of it dampening Tadmartin's red-crossed surcoat and white combats.

The Pontiff leaned back in his chair. Fluorescent lighting glittered from his white and golden robes, stiff with embroidery. He shone against the beige walls like an icon. His small owl-face creased with thought.

"Knight-lieutenant, will you summarize for the board of inquiry the purpose of the Order of Knights Templar, please."

At this moment and in this place, a minefield of a question. Tadmartin responded instantly. "We're a trained elite force, sieurs. Founded in 1130 AD, in the first Holy Land. We do undertake Burgundian missions where necessary, but we see action primarily overseas in Cabotsland. We operate out of the Templar fortresses down the east coast. Our main objective is to keep the pilgrim roads clear from the coast to New Jerusalem. It's therefore necessary for us to keep civil order."

The bio-reporter Craon raised his hand. The priest at Stephen-Maria's side signalled assent.

"Lieutenant Tadmartin." De Craon turned to her, the room's fluorescent lights shining in his wispy hair. "These fortresses are garrisoned with Templars?"

"Yes, and with lay-brothers."

De Craon smiled. Skin creased lizardlike around his mouth. "There is another Order, am I right, who assists you in this?"

She kept her eyes from the Knight-Brigadier of St John. "The Hospitallers provide auxiliary services, yes, sieur."

"But they also see action?"

"After a fashion, sieur, yes."

An almost imperceptible lifting of Stephen-Maria's hand and the bio-reporter became silent. The Pontiff, amiably smiling, said, "Demzelle de Keroac, do you also have a question?"

"Sure I do." The woman planted her elbows on the table. Her curled hair glittered yellow in that suffocating light. She fixed Tadmartin with a brilliant blue eye. "You know your Templar organization also provides a banking service for the United governments?"

"I know that one exists," Tadmartin paused. "I don't know how it functions, demzelle. It never occurred to me that it was my concern."

The woman twitched a muscle in her cheek. The spy-eye whirled into zoom, closing on Tadmartin's face. "Do you know just how rich the Templars are, Knight-lieutenant? Do you realize why that makes them close advisors to presidents?"

"I don't know anything about banking, demzelle. I don't have any money of my own." Momentarily amused at the disbelief on the woman's face, she added, "The Order provides my housing, uniform, food, and equipment. Anything I own was signed over to them when I joined the Order. I never handle money unless I'm getting supplies from the locals round a garrison."

Louise de Keroac snorted. "You're telling me soldiers never go out drinking, or to the local brothels?"

"We are the Knights of God," Tadmartin, not able to hear the tone in which she quietly said that, was surprised to find the room silent. "Some backslide, yes; if they do it repeatedly they lose the house."

A movement snagged peripheral vision. Tadmartin turned her head. Not the Templar Marshal de Molay, sitting still and expressionless. The stout man next to him in black-and-red DPMs and Knight-Brigadier's insignia.

"Harrison, Order of St John," he introduced himself briskly to the media. "What is your view of the Knights Hospitaller, demzelle Tadmartin?"

Dangerous. She refrained from saluting, which was some return for the demzelle. A coldness touched her which was not the air-conditioning. Thoughtfully, she said, "I suppose there's a competitive spirit between all the knightly Orders, *sieur*."

"But between Hospitaliers and Templars? Wouldn't you call it more than 'competitive'?"

She looked towards Stephen-Maria's small, bland face. "Competition is strong, yes, *sieur*. The Hospitaliers being under worldly jurisdiction."

Abruptly Stephen-Maria snatched off his gold-rimmed spectacles, leaning forward and pointing at Tadmartin with a gloved finger. "Knight-lieutenant, do you ever think of the young Indo-Saracen women and men whom you fight? Although they are terrorists and heretics, do you think of them as people, with souls? Human feelings?"

Tadmartin gave that due consideration, relieved at the change of subject. "Not really, *sieur*. I don't think you can afford to. I tend to think in terms of target-areas."

"But you are aware of it."

"Yes, *sieur*."

"One should thank God for it. Since there is wheat among the chaff – innocent civilians among the terrorists."

His eyes were an exact faded blue. It was not possible to tell his age. Tadmartin remained easily at attention. The security detail at the entrance to the building had relieved her of her automatic.

"Under what circumstances is it permissible to kill, lieutenant?"

"I do my job, *sieur*. It's a professional job, and I've been trained to do it very well. Yes, it says in the holy texts *Thou shalt not kill*. It also says *Suffer not the enemies of God to live*. Sometimes that has to be done, and it's better left to trained personnel."

"Pariahs for the Lord." Stephen-Maria smiled. It was not, despite his creased face, a gentle expression. "Who are the enemies of God in Cabotsland, lieutenant?"

Knowing he must know all, Tadmartin nevertheless blinked uneasily at that question. "Indo-Saracen terrorists, *sieur*. Natives. Tokugawa-backed paramilitary groups."

"Yes...and only those. Lieutenant, remember one thing. Your Order answers to no president or government on this earth. It answers to us. We think it would be as well if you answer us truthfully."

"Yes, *sieur*."

How much for the media? How much for the anonymous suited men and women around the table? And who is to be the scapegoat? Tadmartin relaxed imperceptible muscles so that she still stood effortlessly to attention under their scrutiny.

"Lieutenant Tadmartin, you know what is meant by the secret history."

"Yes, *sieur*."

"Will you give us your understanding of the term, please. For the benefit of these people here."

Tadmartin cleared her throat. "It's a traditional term for the Cartulary of a knightly monastic order. It contains the full details of campaigns."

"Full details?" Louise de Keroac pounced. "So what's given to the outside world is censored?"

Tadmartin politely took the offensive. "Not cen-

sored, demzelle, no. Condensed. Would you want all the details of how many water-bowlers were sent to which port and when; how many aerial refuellings took place on any given mission; how many sergeant-brothers were treated for blisters or heat exhaustion –?"

"Just how condensed is the history for public consumption?"

Stephen-Maria V said, "Demzelles, *sieurs*, you can judge for yourselves. Knight-lieutenant Tadmartin, we're going to ask you to answer according to the secret history. We want your own account of the Roanoke incident. You were there. You were, however temporarily, the officer in charge of that company. Regrettably, innocent people died. The reports the public can access through this –" Stephen-Maria tapped the computer console "– are official. You now have our order to speak without reservation."

For whom does one tell the truth? Tadmartin let her gaze go around the table, seeing bankers and politicians and the media; and she did not let her gaze stop at the Templar knight Philippe de Molay in his white and red. No question. Finally, there is no question at all.

Tadmartin said, "No, *sieur*."

"We," Stephen-Maria V said, with a deliberate gravitas, "are granting you absolution from your vow."

Unspoken, his gaze tells her this is enough of the obligatory refusals.

"You can't absolve me from the vows of secrecy, *sieur*, no one can. I'd lose the house and the habit."

He scowled at her stone-wall morality. "My daughter, there have been public accusations made, that the Order of the Knights Templar operates a shoot-on-sight policy in the emirate lands. These talks are to give an equally public refutation of that accusation."

But truth is a seamless whole. Part told, all will be told. Tadmartin shrugged. "*Sieur*. You don't understand. If I speak, I'll have to leave the Order; I couldn't stay – I couldn't face them."

The Supreme Pontiff remained silent, but the priest at his left hand said quietly, "For refusing to obey the supreme head of your Order you will lose the house, demzelle. I remind you of this."

"Yes." Tadmartin did not say I know. She let the media frustration wash over her, standing steady, her gaze fixed just slightly to the left of the Pontiff's head.

James de Craon interjected, "What have you got to hide, lieutenant?"

"Nothing. This isn't about me. It's about the Rule of the Knights Templar."

Pope Stephen-Maria V said, "Will you speak?"

Tadmartin shook her head. "No."

"You must."

She allowed herself the luxury of showing, in full, what she felt in part. "*Sieur*, I can't!"

For the first time her voice varied from its reasonable calm. A soldier's voice, roughened with shouting over the noise of firefights; a woman's voice thinned by the heat of bandit country. Now she heard her voice shake.

"We're Templars. We are what we are because of how we behave. You don't break vows. You don't. We're not just any body of fighting men. *Sieur*, you must understand, you're the Pontiff. I can't obey the order you're giving me."

The priest leaned forward and murmured in the Pontiff's ear. "I warned you, your Holiness. The men won't speak, the officers won't speak; it was most unlikely you could persuade a junior officer of the Templars to speak out in open court."

"We are the head of the Order!"

Tadmartin made as if to say something, opening her mouth, but her throat constricted and she was silent. All muscles tense, as if her body urged her speak out!, but she literally could say nothing.

Am I really going to do this? she thought. Am I going to let them—no, am I going to make them throw me out of the Order? Jesu Sophia! I'm too old to go back to the regular army—and they won't take me anyway.

"For God's sake, sieur." She at last appealed to the Templar Marshal seated midway down the righthand side of the table. She spoke doubly: in her role as stolid knight, and with her own secret knowledge. "I've got nowhere to go if I leave the Order. I couldn't even buy civilian clothes! Don't let them force me out. Sieur, please!"

"There's nothing I can do, lieutenant."

De Molay's tone let her know he was aware of duplicity. The man's face was flushing a dull red: anger at her display of emotion, anger at his own embarrassment. Not until he looked away from her to the Knight of St John, and then back, did she catch his expression properly. Seen once before, in a chapel, one cold dawn.

"Get rid of these people!"

The Pontiff swore at his attendant priests and shoved his chair back, rising. The chair clattered over. The swirl of his robes as he turned caught a censer, tipping out burning sandalwood coals. One black-suited man stampled furiously on the sparks. Stephen-Maria stalked out.

The men and women at the table rose, caught by surprise. Talk broke out; the media people checking recordings; the rest debating uncertainties.

Tadmartin stood, undismissed. Even now, hoping against knowledge for a reprieve. Praise, even, for her steadfastness. Nothing came.

A quartet of military police officers filed in to escort her out.

5 July 1997

When it comes to a question, which do you choose?

There is no question.

The truck jolts and her ribs slam against the rim of the cab-window. The road to New Jerusalem winds up into the high lands, white under the moon. An exposed road, here.

The Hospitaller APCs judder past, tracks grinding white dust that falls wet and heavy from their passing.

"What's the intelligence report on hostiles?"

"They're saying up to sixty hostiles, heavily-armed. Fucking sakkies." Tysoe spits.

Tadmartin has never seen that trail's end. Has never been posted to that tiny Vinland settlement where, one millennium since, Sophie Christos came to preach her gnostic gospel and reap the reward commonly given to reformers. But Tadmartin has, on the same chain as her dog-tag, a tiny fragment of the Second True Cross embedded in clear plastic.



"Give the Hospitalers sixty minutes dead," she directs Tysoe. "If they can't get their half of the ambush set up by then, fuck 'em."

"Bastards."

Brown cam-cream distorts the angles of moonlight on Tysoe's face. She's leaner than she was in training, five years ago; a long-jawed, bony woman.

"Something you should have reported to me, girl?"

"Pfcs Johannes Louis and Gilles Barker aren't on duty."

The captain absent, Tadmartin is senior of the four lieutenants at the garrison. Tysoe has Squad One, Cohen Two, and Ragald has Three; sergeants are keeping the fort secure. Close on a hundred men, a company-size operation. Needless to say she has not commanded at this level before, or not officially, and not under combat conditions. It tends to blur the minutiae.

She notes now that Squad One has a replacement man on heavy-weapons support, and a woman Tadmartin recognizes from the garrison taking the RT. She misses Gilles Barker's snap-on laconic radio technique. Johannes Louis will be missed by no one, realistically, but that's not the point; he was part of the squad.

"Brawling, wasn't it? They're both on the medic register."

The exigencies of ambush take her away from the vehicle for a minute, sending Two Squad and Three Squad up into position to approach the valley. Trees sway and creak. The night is uneasy, and the full moon an annoyance. And all the time that white, white road runs east away from her, dusty with the feet of a million pilgrims, trudging or riding broken-down trucks from Templar fort to Templar fort, all the way to the end of the trail.

She hauls herself up into the back of the truck.

"We'll move out in five."

Tension. Final checks of equipment—grenade launchers, heavy machineguns, flamers, assault rifles—and the mutters of *shit* and *fuck* and *Jesu Sophia!*, and the churning gut that always comes with action; the fear that stops the breath in your lungs. Tadmartin puts her head down for a second, inhaling deeply, and straightens with some electric excitement replacing breath.

"Barker and Louis." Tysoe says, joining her. "Hospitalers jumped 'em last night."

"Sophie Christos," Tadmartin says, disgusted.

Raleightown, a spring night, Tadmartin new in the outremer territories; she and the other Knight-lieutenants gone drinking. In downtown bars where the whisky is rough and cheap, and there are the young men and women who naturally congregate around military bases: who know what to offer and what to expect in payment. But Tadmartin tells herself she is only there for the drink. And Tadmartin, leaning out of a bar door and throwing up in the street, is hit in the kidneys from behind, sprawls face down in her own vomit, white DPMs stained yellow and brown.

"Fuckin' Templar cunt!"

Tadmartin does nothing but come easily up onto her feet. Head clearing, the night slipping past in freeze-frames: herself on hands and knees, herself standing, three Hospitaler squaddies grinning—a redhaired man and two sharp-uniformed women.

"Yo," she says softly. Turns smartly, unsteadily, on her heel and walks back into the bar, back where Tysoe and—names? names forgotten, but the company lieutenants are there, and two sergeant preceptors, so there are six of them; and out into the night, where one of the Hospitaler women is still visible down the road, and off and running into the downtown quarter. Following her down the road at a sprint, streetlights failing, and swinging down one alley and across into the next—

Where there are thirty Hospitaler squaddies waiting. Her buddies. Tadmartin finds out that they even call it *Templar-bashing*.

Arrests and enquiries do not follow, not even for a shit-stupid dumbass excuse for a lieutenant. Templars and Hospitalers have to police the same territory, after all. There are nominal noises of disapproval on both sides. She is out of hospital in a matter of months and feels pain in her hands for two winters after.

"Stupid bastards. Aw, shit, Tysoe, girl!"

Warnings go out from the company captain's desk, strict warnings with penalties attached. Leave the Hospitalers alone. There will always be grunts who regard them as challenges, or a matter of pride.

"Louis'll be back." The woman puts on her helmet, clips the strap, checks the internal RT. "They blinded Gilles Barker. Left eye. Going to be invalidated out."

"Christ."

Implications flick through her head. For a shared op.

"Where's the report on this?"

"It's on your desk."

"Shit. Okay—" Too late to change the plan now. All she can do is keep a closer eye on Squad One. "Okay, I'll come in with you guys; Ragald can take Three up the road. That's time—let's roll."

Out of the truck and into the forests. Maybe a mile to cover, but a mile in silence. They melt into night and quiet, each one; going down into a silent crawl, shifting twigs and branches as they move, falling into the rhythm of clear ground, move elbow, clear ground, move knee...

Five minutes.

The terrain changes. Leaving the forest for wet heather, and then up along drained hillslopes and into pine. Tadmartin moves in the night, combats soaked, warm with the weight she carries. Slow, slow. Cold breath drifts from her mouth; cam-cream is cold on her skin. She crawls past a fox. Unspooked, it watches her go. The night wind moves the creaking pines.

"Delta Alpha, sit-rep, over?"

"This is Delta Alpha, in position, out."

"Hotel Oscar, sit-rep, over."

"Hotel Oscar to Romeo Victor, say again, over?"

"Romeo Victor to Hotel Oscar, sit-rep, say again, sit-rep, over."

"...Victor, in position, do you copy?"

"Hotel Oscar, I copy, out. Sierra Foxtrot, sit-rep, over."

"In position, Romeo Victor. Out."

She curses the moon. Too much light. It blotches the ground under the gnarled pines, splashes the jutting rocks at the edges of the deep valley. Low-voiced zip-squirts over the RT assure her Tysoe's got Squad

One in position along the cliff-top. Three's further up; Two covering flank and rear.

Tadmartin moves up, assault rifle cradled, crawling silently from cover to cover. She edges on her belly into the brushwood that overhangs one jutting rock.

The night wind is cold against her eyes. At least the noise will screen movement – but that's a two-edged weapon. She stares down into the valley.

A bright flicker of light is moonlight on the stream, thrashing in its rock-strewn bed. The road winds along the valley floor, sometimes beside the river, sometimes crossing it. The overhang she lies on is fifty yards upstream of a bridge. Nothing moving down there yet. No sound of engines. She merges into the stripes of moonlight and brushwood, thinking tree.

And across the other side of the gorge a glint of light shows her someone using night glasses. She subvocalizes for the helmet RT and zipsquirts:

"Romeo Force to Juliet, repeat Romeo Force to Juliet, do you copy? Tell your men to lay off the night scopes, they can see 'em back in town, for fuck's sake! Over."

There is the split-second time-delay of zipsquirt transmission, then:

"Juliet Force to Romeo, wilco, out."

Curt to the point of abruptness. Tadmartin grins but it stiffens, becomes a rictus on her face. Thinking of Johannes Louis and Gilles Barker.

She lies on her belly and stares across the gorge, idly pinpointing the more unwary of the Hospitaller troops. The ambush will lay fire down into the valley and nothing will walk out of it. Assuming that the hostiles come down the valley and not around it. Assuming that intelligence is right and an arms-shipment is due. Assuming.

Always assuming.

"Romeo Victor, this is Sierra Foxtrot. We have a possible contact, repeat, possible contact at Falcon Station. Advise, over."

"Sierra Foxtrot, this is Romeo Victor. Confirm sighting and advise numbers. Let them come past you. Out. Romeo Force to Juliet –" She swallows, continues with a level voice. "Possible contact at Falcon Station. Over."

"Juliet to Romeo, I copy, out."

Each of the valley bends has been assigned a name. She listens to the zipsquirt transmissions: Falcon, Eagle, Duck, and Crow all passed, and then the sound of engines is clear to her. She blinks up visual enhancement, closing one eye and staring down the valley. Patches of moonlight blot and blind. She blinks enhancement off and relies on one eye's night vision.

There.

Nosing around the corner of the gorge, one... two... three closed trucks, rolling with the movements of heavily-loaded vehicles. An artic, straining at the gradient. Three more trucks, and a battered old limo. The engines shatter the silence of the woods.

"Romeo Victor to all units, confirmed sighting at Bluejay Station." Sliding the assault rifle up the length of her chilled body so that it will not catch on the rock. The way behind her is clear for retreat. The gorge in front of her is one killing zone. "Hold your fire until I give the signal –"

Silence shatters. The night coughs a throat of flame. The abrupt noise stutters her heart. The limo at the rear of the line swerves in a pall of fire, hits the edge of the stream and rolls half-over. Shouts and screams come from the valley, the advance trucks gun their motors.

"– fuck!" Tadmartin rolls over on her side.

Muzzle flashes burst down the whole other side of the valley: the Hospitaller troops opening fire.

"Okay. Okay. Take out the front vehicle!"

Two of the rear trucks accelerate into the shadows of overhangs. Inside seconds there is the rattle and crack of small-arms fire. The flares blaze in. Tadmartin hears the *whumph!* of a grenade launcher and ducks her head into her arms, comes up and looses off suppressive fire down towards the rear of the column. There is the amputating roar of claymore mines as hostiles abandon the trucks.

Explosions deafen her. Hot air hits her cheek, splinters of wood spatter the rockface. The grenade explosion takes out a chunk of the bank and starts fire in the brushwood.

"Heavy weapon! Tysoe, take that truck out!"

Tysoe's yell from ten yards away: "Assault team move up!"

"Romeo Victor to Sierra Foxtrot, close up the back door, repeat, close up the back door. Out. Romeo Victor to Hotel Oscar, Cohen, cover our fucking asses, we've got an illegal firefight going on up here, watch our backs, out; Tysoe, do you copy? Repeat, do you copy, over?"

Now there is no answer.

"Romeo Victor to all squads. Bottle the bastards up. Out!"

Two rounds clip the branches above her head and she swears, sprayed with exploded fragments of pine wood. The stink of resin fills the air, sickly-sweet with cordite and woodsmoke. She glances over her shoulder at the brushfire.

"Move 'em down!" She falls into cover, finding Tysoe a few yards ahead. In the valley, one of the trucks swings around in an impossible turning-circle and accelerates back towards the bridge. Someone screams. "Medic! Squad One Medic – through there."

She pushes the medic on down through the trees and leaves him squatting over a grunt with a shattered face. Hair blown black, face glistening red, eye and jaw mincemeat. There is blood on her combats to the elbow, she doesn't remember touching him.

"Where's it coming from?" Tysoe and the assault team hit cover beside her. "It ought to be a fucking turkey-shoot, where's it coming from?"

"You!" Tadmartin grabs the woman with the heavy weapon: a shoulder-fired rocket launcher. "Take that bridge out – now."

The grunt belches past her, kneels. Two successive blasts shake the air. Flame shoots from the rear of the rocket launcher as the shell projects. Line of sight into the valley is obscured by flare-lit shifting smoke. Muzzle flashes gleam through it, and the roar of brushfire whipped up by the night wind. Tadmartin hears voices screaming – on the banks? in the valley? – and the *whoomph!* of a truck going up. Hot air blows against her face. She smells the charred stink of cooking meat. Rounds whistle through the pine trees. Belly-down, crawling; and then there is a hollow

concussive sound from the end of the valley and a cheer from the assault team.

"Bridge is down, L.T. We cut off the retreat."

"Good. Lay down fire into the valley —"

There is a *crump!* and the night lights up like Christmas. That one landed behind: a cut-off shot. The pine trees burn like pitch torches and the night is hot; she is sweating and covered with black ash and her hands are blistered.

"L.T., that came across the valley!"

"Give me a range and direction!"

"Fifty metres, two o'clock."

"Lay down suppressive fire. Tysoe, take 'em down the south side of the valley. Now." Tadmartin falls into cover behind a rock outcrop. The stuttering cough of a heavy machine-gun vibrates through the earth. Flashes of light strobe the night: give her lightning-strike views of branches against the night sky, grunts running, a casevac team with a bodybag. Her face bleeds. "Romeo Force to Juliet, do you c —"

"They're firing on us. The fucking Hospitaliers!" Tysoe, camcream smeared with blood, stands up waving the assault rifle. "For Christ's sake tell them to cease fire!"

"Romeo Force to Juliet, repeat, Romeo Force to Juliet. Cease firing on friendly targets. Repeat cease fire on valley wall. Juliet Force, do you copy? You're firing on us! Do you copy? For fuck's sake, answer me."

Her dry throat croaks. She is aware of her split lip, bleeding in the night's chill. The helmet RT has insufficient power in this atmospheric muck; the woman with the RT was the casevac case; and Tadmartin pushes up from her cover and leans round the outcrop, spraying the far valley wall with undirected fire. "Cease fire! Cease fire! We're in a fucking killing zone here!"

The rifle is hot, magazine almost exhausted; she with swift precision removes it and snicks another one home. She feels the slick, greasy heat of shit down her thighs.

"Squad One reform and move up!" Tysoe bawls. She dips for a split second beside Tadmartin. "They're asking for it — they're asking for it! We're going to take them out! It's the only way!"

Another shell lands behind, up the valley wall. Rock splinters shrapnel the woods. Pull out? The way's blocked. Back to basic procedure: fight through. Tadmartin yells, "Take the fuckers out. Go!"

Squad One are gone, pounding through the brushwood. Tadmartin goes a step or two after them and then falls into cover. The situation's sliding out of control, and she's got two other squads to contend with and the hostiles in the valley: let Squad One go do it. Cut losses.

"Romeo Victor calling Delta Alpha, move up into position at the valley wall above Bluejay Station, I repeat, move up into position at valley wall above Bluejay Station. Fire at will. Out. Romeo Victor to Hotel Oscar — get your asses up the south side and give Squad One covering fire. Move it!"

At daybreak she will walk through the floor of the valley, past burst and burnt-out trucks, when dawn glitters through the trees and off the stream. The track is puddled with red mud for two hundred yards. There are bodies and bits of bodies in the vehicles,

charred and black. There is meat hanging from the trees.

She will walk the far side of the valley wall and watch the casevac of Hospitalier troops. Flying out to the same field hospitals as her own troops. She will hear the Hospitalier captain's oddly apologetic offer of help; an offer that vanishes when it emerges his troops are chewed up twice as bad as the Templars.

What will she feel? Satisfaction, mostly. Righteous satisfaction.

Daybreak, and things become visible.

There aren't half a dozen rifles together in the column. Of course, it wasn't a shipment of arms. Nothing for a stealth ambush to make an example of. It was, it later transpires, thirty families of paramilitary terrorists being shifted out from an up-trail district (in secrecy) into Indian territory. For their own safety.

Families with a small guard. Civilians.

Anything more than a quite minor investigation and it is unlikely Templar and Hospitalier troops will be tenable in the same territory. When it comes to a question, truth or something you can live with, which do you choose?

5 July 2002

"Did you hear? They want to cancel the Unification Day parade next year." Knight-lieutenant Tysoe leans morosely against the doorframe of the cell. "Because the *ordnance damages the streets*, for Chrissakes! Fucking government shit. When they start worrying about tanks chewing up a few roads, then you know you've lost it."

Tadmartin ignores her. The cell containing only a small mirror, she is studying her full-length reflection in the metal door.

"Shit..."

A woman something under medium height, shoulders stretching the cloth of her demob tunic. Blonde hair far too short for a civilian. A young woman with a sunburned face; moving uneasily in the heeled shoes, smoothing down the plain cloth skirt.

"Who'd be a fucking Templar? You ain't missing nothing," Tysoe assures her uncomfortably.

Tadmartin looks.

"Well, fuck, man..."

"It's all right," Tadmartin says. "It's all right."

"We know what you did."

Tadmartin hefts her small shoulderbag. Gifts, mostly. Facecloth, toothbrush, underwear, sanitary towels. "Write or something, will you?"

It is a momentary lapse. Some lies are easier than others. Tysoe says "Sure!" and ducks her head uncomfortably, waits a moment in the face of Tadmartin's calm, then shrugs and leaves.

Little now to do. Tadmartin reaches up to the weapons rack on the cell wall and takes down the rebated eleventh century sword.

The TV snaps on, on autotimer: she ignores the whispering voices.

Tadmartin sits on her bed, her back against the wall, the rebated sword resting with its hilt against her shoulder and the blade across her body. She rubs microcrystalline wax into the metal with a soft cloth, the movements rhythmically smooth.

It is the last piece of equipment she will return to the armoury.

She finishes with maintenance, stands; holding the hilt and letting the blade flip up into first guard position. The sun shines into the monastic cell. There is just space enough to lose herself in the drill of cut, parry, block...

The blade moves smoothly in the air. The solidity of the grip, the heft of the blade; moving in a balance that makes it all – edge, guard, grip, pommel – a singularity of weapon.

She loses herself in it.

Becoming no-sword, one culminates in total resignation, abandoned to the skill of the blade. Nothing matters. One cannot care about winning, losing, survival, dying. One cannot care, and act right. She enters the complete, balanced resignation of the fighter: dead, alive, alive, dead. No matter. No difference.

The face on the TV screen focuses in her combat-widened peripheral vision. The fair-haired woman, de Keroac; capable and triumphant. Tadmartin hears her speak.

"The government's denial of accusations that they are operating a shoot-on-sight policy in emirate Cabotsland was further complicated yesterday by the breakdown of the Avignon talks."

"Talks broke down when a Templar officer, demzelle Hyacinthe Tadmartin, refused to give any eye-witness evidence whatsoever about her command at Roanoke. Claims will now continue to be levelled at the government that the civilians killed at Roanoke were innocent casualties of what is, in all but name, a war in the New Holy Land. It is five years to the day since the Roanoke massacre claimed fifty-three civilian lives. This is Louise de Keroac, for Channel Nine."

The words are heard but they do not matter.

She is a sword, a sword now out of service. But held in the balance of that resignation she knows, no-intention will carry her far abroad. Alone. Away from bystanders who she may, instinctively, hurt.

Tadmartin walks out of the cell, putting the first foot on the pilgrim road – unrecognized as yet – that will take her, solitary and one day in the far future, to the New Jerusalem.

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Mary Gentle is the author of *Rats and Gargoyles* (1990) and several other highly praised sf and fantasy novels. She became a regular book reviewer for *Interzone* in the mid-1980s, before resigning that chore to concentrate on her own fiction. Now we are pleased to announce she is back, both as a reviewer (see *IZ* 50 and this issue) and as a writer of stories. Colin Greenland interviewed her in our issue 42. Mary lives in Stevenage, Hertfordshire.



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GEORGE and the COMET

STEPHEN BAXTER

There was no jolt, no sharp transition from what I had been to what I have become. I didn't wake up to find I had changed. Awareness faded in, like a slow dissolve.

I was lying on my back. I felt odd. I am – was – a big man; I played a lot of rugby when I was younger... But now, lying there, I felt small and light, as if I might blow away.

I stared up at a sky that was very strange indeed. Half of it was covered by a diseased sun – vast, red, bloated, its surface crawling with blisters of fire and dark pits. And, directly over me, there burned a moon (I thought at first), a sphere emitting shining gases which streamed away from the sun.

That was no moon, I realized suddenly. It was a comet. What the hell was going on?

A face drifted into view: a monkey's face, a mask of fur surrounding startling blue eyes. The monkey said, "Can you hear me? Do you remember who you are?"

I closed my eyes. So. Obviously I was at home in my Islington flat, having a bad night following a bad day.

I was thirty-two, a middle manager in a software house. After a day of being chased from above and below I often found it difficult to switch off; I would spend hours without sleep, finally falling into that uneasy state between sleep and wakefulness, adrift amid lurid dreams.

So I knew what was happening... But I couldn't remember what I had done yesterday. I couldn't even work out what day of the week it had been.

Meanwhile there was a distraction, a sharp pain in my cheek.

Reluctantly I opened my eyes. The ailing sun, the comet were still there, and I became aware that the branches of some huge tree hung over me. My monkey friend hung from a branch by one hand and foot. Its body was delicate – quite graceful-looking – except that its skin looked about three sizes too large; it was looped like a furry cloak around the shoulders and legs.

The monkey's breath smelt sweet, like young wood. And it was pinching my cheek.

I lifted an arm to brush its hand away, and I was struck again by a feeling of insubstantiality. My hand blurred across my vision, pawlike and covered in a pale fur. I tried not to worry about it.

"I know what you're thinking," the monkey said, its voice tinny. "But it isn't a dream. It's real, all of it. I spent a week trying to wake up out of it; you may as well accept –"

"Piss off," I squeaked.

Squeaked...? My God, I sounded like Donald Duck. I rubbed my jaw and found a face that was small and round and covered in a wiry fur.

"Have it your own way," the monkey said. It reached out its four limbs and all that loose skin stretched out in sheets, so that the creature looked like a cute, furry kite. Like a gymnast it spun around its branch once, twice, and then let go and went gliding out of my view.

I'd seen something like that at a zoo, years ago. A flying lemur with an exotic name. Colugo?

Why dream about a talking lemur?

Then again, why not?

I jammed my eyes shut.

But the world wouldn't go away. And meanwhile I was getting uncomfortable; whatever I was lying on was scratchy, like straw, and the backs of my legs prickled.

With a sigh I opened my eyes. The great sun was still there, a dome of fiery pools and pits of darkness, like some industrial landscape. The pits mottling the surface looked like photos I remembered of real sunspots.

I spread my hands below me – I found twigs and leaves – and sat up. I moved easily enough, although I felt as if I were wearing some heavy coat which snagged in the twigs.

I held my right hand in front of my face.

The hand was small and narrow, with two fingers and a thumb; hard, flat nails tipped the fingers and, although the palm was bright pink, the back of the hand was coated with mud-brown fur. There was webbing between the fingers – I could see light through the veined membranes – and more webbing, or skin, fell away from my forearm in great untidy folds. The webbing was covered with a fine fur which lay in neat, smooth streamlines, like a cat's. I lifted my arms and saw how the sheets of skin stretched down to my splayed, spindly legs; I wasn't surprised to find another pane of flesh connecting my legs too.

When I dug my nail into the webby stuff I felt a sharp pain. So this shabby cloak was part of me.

I was a monkey too. The king of the swingers, the jungle VIP. I laughed – but stopped at the squeaky scratch which emerged from my throat.

I was sitting in the topmost branches of a tree. The tree filled the world; I peered down through the branches towards a ground lost in a translucent green gloom.

There was a rustle of leaves; delicate as a sparrow my monkey friend landed before me. Its sail flaps collapsed in folds. Its face was small and delicate, with a long snout, flaring nostrils and a tiny mouth. "My God," it said. "I've just realized."

"What?"

"You speak English! My God, my God."

"So?"

"But, don't you see – It might have been ancient Etruscan." It sniffled and wiped away a tear from with one furry hand. "Then again, perhaps it was all planned this way."

I considered closing my eyes again. "I wish I knew what you were talking about."

"I'm sorry." It looked at me with moist, human eyes. "My name is George; George Newbould. I was in London. I think I remember 1985. AD," it added helpfully.

I opened my mouth – and closed it again. "My name's Phil Beard. But the date –" 1985? "I don't understand. What date is it?"

It – he, I conceded – he absently scratched at one pointed ear. "So you agree this isn't a dream?"

"I don't agree any such –" I shook my head, frustrated. "Just tell me. Have I been in some kind of accident?"

He grinned, showing rows of flat teeth. "You could say that. Look, Mr Beard, I don't know any more than you do. But I've been, ah, awake, a few days longer, and I've made some guesses. I used to be a teacher, you see – General Science at a middle school – so I know a little about a lot, and –"

"Perhaps we could go over your CV later."

"All right. I'm sorry. I think we've been reconstructed."

I pulled at a flap of skin. "Reconstructed how? Anyway, I didn't need reconstructing. I wasn't ill, or dead..."

"You ask how... I'd guess from some fragment of DNA; a fingernail clipping, or a tooth in some fossil layer, perhaps. Like a clone."

Fossil layer? I looked up at the swollen sun, shivering.

"That's why we don't have clear memories of what we did before, you see. The real Phil Beard threw away that nail clipping and carried on his life. The new Beard is a clone with a vague Beard-ness but without specific memories. As to who did this, I can't even guess." He tilted his face up to the sky; comet light picked out the bones around his eyes. "After all this time, there might not be humans any more. Maybe the ants took over the world. Or maybe life as we know it – I mean, life based on our sort of DNA – is extinct altogether; maybe a whole new order, silicon-based, has arisen to replace us, and –"

"George –" I tried to keep my voice level. "How did I get to be a fossil? Where are we? What year is it?"

He jerked his thumb at the sky. "I think that's the sun. Our sun, I mean. It's gone red giant. You want a date? Five billion years, AD. Give or take," he added.

I rubbed my furry chin. "So it's five billion years after 1985. The sun has turned into a red giant, the human race is long since extinct, and future super-creatures have reconstructed me as a small, furry edition of Batman."

He looked at me out of the side of his face. "That's about the size of it. You don't believe it, do you?"

"Not a word," I said.

He shrugged and stretched out his sails. "Suit yourself."

"Hey. Wait for me," I said. I tried to stand up, but my balance was funny and I toppled forward into the leaves. "What do you do, flap?"

"No, you glide. You control the angle of the sail stuff with your thumbs. See?"

And so, by the light of the ancient sun, George and I sailed through the branches of our tree.

The tree bore fruit. I mooched through the upper branches of the tree, nibbling experimentally. The best was a bitter-sweet red berry. I tried the fist-sized leaves; they were bland and tasteless, but the younger specimens bulged with water; I crushed them into my mouth and felt cool liquid trickle down my throat. George said that it had rained once, and that he had managed to catch fresh water in a cup of leaves.

Some of the greener twigs were thinner than bamboo and quite flexible, and George had woven a box-shaped cocoon for himself. By shoving leaves into the gaps between the twigs he had made the walls fairly opaque. At first I laughed at this shanty. "George, you don't need any protection." I flapped my sail sheets dramatically. "It's warm and there's never more than a soft breeze. And there's no one else here... Is there?"

"That's not the point. Mr Beard, I'm a schoolteacher from West London. I'm not used to the lifestyle of a flying lemur. I feel safer with walls and a roof."

I scoffed.

...But, when I started feeling sleepy, I made automatically for George's crude shelter. As I entered he glanced up from his task - he was making a bow from a branchlet and a liana-like trailer, patiently goading his clumsy hands through the intricate work - and then looked away, without speaking.

I made for the darkest corner of the hut and wrapped my sails around me.

When I awoke George had finished his bow. He had wrapped its string around a short length of stick; now he was experimentally rolling the stick back and forth with the bow string. Silhouetted against the dim, green light his movements were graceful, almost sensual. I felt a strange itch deep beneath the skin of my groin.

It occurred to me that I ought to be terrified. Can you fall asleep inside a dream?

But fear still hadn't hit me. And in the meantime that tickle in my groin had turned into another kind of ache; man or lemur, there's no mistaking the feeling of a full bladder. I pushed my way out of my corner, rubbing sleep from my eyes, and climbed out of the hut.

Then my problems started.

The penis of a flying lemur is nothing to show off in the changing room. Even when erect. I spent five minutes just trying to find the damn thing. Then I could barely hold it; I hosed into space, feeling hot liquid course over my hands.

As for the rest - well, I had a fur-covered backside and leaves for lavatory paper. And no running water.

But lemurs have their moments...

When I'd done I launched through the leaves of our world-tree, feeling the wind cup in my skin-sails; if I could catch a breeze I could hang in the air like a seagull, surrounded by comet light and the scent of growing wood.

The sun hung in the sky, vast and ill. There were no days, no nights here.

George had a theory about that too. "I don't think we're on Earth. I think they -"

"Who?"

"The Builders, the people who reconstructed us... I think they built this place for us."

"Then why didn't they give us a day and a night?"

He poked one finger into a wide nostril. "I don't think it occurred to them. You see, eventually - long after our day - solar tides slowed the Earth; at last the sun stopped crossing the sky. No more day or night."

"But the Builders must have known we're from a time when the Earth still turned."

"But it was long ago to them. Mr Beard, a lot of people of our time thought that, let's say, Alexander the Great was contemporary with Julius Caesar. In fact centuries separated them..."

"It was that long ago?" I shivered, and the furs over my arms stood on edge. I brushed them down absently. George stared at the way my small biceps worked; then he caught himself and looked away, embarrassed.

"Why couldn't they just land us back on Earth?" I asked. "Maybe after all this time Earth isn't habitable, do you think? The greenhouse effect, the ozone layer -"

George laughed and flapped his sails. "Mr Beard,

I fear the ozone layer, or the lack of it, is one with Nineveh and Tyre."

"With what?"

"Never mind. The sun has exhausted its hydrogen fuel and has swollen into that great, swimming globe above us. When the outer layers grazed the Earth's orbit the planet - or whatever blasted ruin was left - spiralled towards the core. Soon it flashed into a mist of iron, along with Mercury, Venus, Mars... All gone."

I stared up at the sun. "Makes you think, doesn't it, George?"

"Yes. We're a long way from home."

Hour succeeded changeless hour.

I clambered through the branches into the depths of our tree. As I entered green twilight the fur on my back prickled; but the tangle of branches seemed empty. No birds, no insects even. I wondered how this tree sustained itself. Was a single-organism ecology possible?

I reached the bottom level of the branches; about fifty feet above a featureless earth I clung upside down from a ceiling of wood. Fat branches led like an inverted road network to a single, massive trunk some hundred yards away.

I scampered along the branches towards the trunk.

The trunk was about six feet across. (George and I appeared to be about a foot long - not that it was easy to tell). The bark was thick, riven by crevices wide enough for my little hands, and I clambered down easily. When I reached the roots I got to my hind legs, clinging to the trunk timidly; then, like a simian Neil Armstrong, I pushed one foot away from the roots and into the mulch. Brown, curling leaves as large as my wingspan crackled under my feet. Under the top layer the mulch was soft, decaying and even warm, as if the ground were some vast compost heap.

I took a few experimental steps - and, with a squeak, fell flat on my face. I got up and fell again, backwards this time. To my infuriation my lithe little body just wouldn't walk upright. I had to scamper on all fours, like the beast I had become.

I raged around the clearing, sail flaps billowing; I tore at dead leaves and hurled them into the air, screaming my frustration.

At last I lay with my back to the trunk, panting, bits of ripped leaf clinging to my fur.

There was a rushing sound, somewhere far above: rain, I guessed, pattering against the upper branches. After a few minutes fat droplets seeped through the woven ceiling and splashed over my upturned face. The water tasted fresh and leafy.

There were no signs of other tree trunks, animal tracks, plants - nothing but a plain of leaves fading in the dimness under a branch canopy. I brushed away leaf fragments, picked a direction and set off, hopping and hovering stoically.

After about a hundred yards I could barely see the tree trunk. I felt small, helpless and lost.

I hurried back to the trunk and clung to its skirts of wood.

At length I tried again. This time I stopped every ten yards to make a marker, a heap of leaves and mulch taller than I was. After some minutes of this my line of cairns led off, quite straight, into the arboreal gloom.



The trunk was out of sight again.

Panic hit me. But I didn't go back; I buried myself in the compost and folded my sails around my head, and when I felt surer I clambered out and pressed on, deeper into the shadows.

I was glad nobody was watching.

There was no way of measuring time down there, of course, but some hours must have passed before I found the second trunk. It hove out of the gloom twenty or thirty yards to the right of my line of cairns. I hurried to it, thinking at first that I had circled and come back to my starting point; but there were no markers here, no sign that the forest surface had been disturbed.

Timidly I clambered up to the branch world.

The bloated sun was hidden by the tree world, as was the core of the comet; but comet streamers, twisting faster than before, filled the sky with a glow like exploded moonlight.

So I had walked over the horizon. But the branches were empty. No lemur-people; no super-alien...

No answers.

I descended, swiping at the leaves with frustration.

On the ground I set off again, extending my trail of cairns. Some hours later another trunk appeared, this time some distance to my left of my trail. I hurried to it.

A line of leaf cairns, flattened by rain, led away into the darkness. I had returned to my starting point; I had walked around the world.

I spent much of the next few days repeating this exercise; soon cairns trailed pointlessly around the world.

I was marooned on a globe no more than half a mile across. The world bore a single tree, with twin trunks set opposite each other like poles. And, supported by the trunks, a shell of branches encased the world.

George was intrigued by all this. He wondered how gravity was maintained. Black holes at the core of the planet...?

I wasn't interested. I went for long, searing glides through the branches, trying to work off my tension.

I had found the bounds of my prison. It contained only George and myself. And there was no way out, no one even to tell me why I was here.

I dug my nails into tree bark and screamed.

I spat berry seeds and chewed stems. "Admit it, George. Your theory that we were cloned from fingernails is a crock."

He sighed; he was hunched over his latest device, a slab of wood into which he was drilling a pit with a sharpened stick. "Maybe it is. What do I know?"

"If I was a clone I'd be a physical copy but a separate individual. I'd be a man with no memories of the Phil Beard of 1991. But in fact I'm still Phil Beard, trapped in the body of a damn monkey." I shook my sails. "See?"

"Maybe the Builders used techniques we can't even guess at," George whispered. "Maybe souls leave fossils too, in some invisible sediment layer."

I frowned. "So they reconstructed minds and bodies - separately - and put them together? Is that what you're saying?"

"I suppose so."

I jumped up, waving my tiny fists at him. "But why us, George? Why me?" He dropped his head to his

chest, not even trying to answer as I capered before him. "And why make monkeys, George? Why not give us human bodies; why not reconstruct London instead of some damn jungle?"

He rubbed at his snout, leaving a glistening streak on his palm. "Actually I've a theory about that."

"I bet you do."

He lifted his head. "Distance in time, Mr Beard... You see, only a few per cent difference in DNA coding separates humans from the rest of the primates: chimps, gorillas. And I would guess that only a few per cent distinguishes humans from even the earliest primates."

"Since when were flying lemurs the first primates?"

"Not lemurs, but an animal similar in structure and ecology. That's the theory, at any rate. You see, the 'lemurs' developed hands and visual coordination to help with their gliding. Later they used their grasping fingers to build tools."

I shook my head. "Let me get this straight. The Builders, seeking to house our - soul fossils - tried to reconstruct human DNA. But they got it wrong."

"Over ninety per cent right, actually. It was a good job. We are very remote in time."

I screamed and jumped about the tree top, rattling my arms. "But you're still guessing, aren't you, George? I've been all around this damn little world; there's nobody here except you and me, and you don't know anything, do you, George?" I hurled leaves and twigs into his face. "You don't know! You don't know!"

He wrapped his arms over his face and rocked backwards and forwards.

Suddenly my anger imploded, leaving a shell of self-disgust. "George, George." I squatted in front of him and pulled at his arms. "Come on, out."

He lifted his arms so that they framed his tearful face. "I'm sorry."

"It's me who's sorry, George."

"I miss my wife."

I felt my jaw drop. "I never you knew you were married."

He shrugged and buried his face again.

"Kids?"

He shook his head.

Hesitantly I stroked at his arms. The skin was warm and soft, and the lay of the fur seemed to guide my palms.

I felt that itch in my groin again.

I snatched my hand away. "My God, George. You're a female, aren't you?"

He nodded miserably. "Just another little slip by the Builders. As if I didn't have enough troubles."

I edged away from him. "George, this changes the whole basis of our relationship."

He unwrapped his arms and picked up his crude tools. "I don't want to talk about it."

he said, and he resumed his patient drilling.

I flung myself through the branches of the world tree, willing away the ache beneath my belly.

George filled the pit in his piece of wood with bits of dry leaf from the forest floor. Then he wrapped the string of his bow around a thin stick, stood the stick in the leaves, and moved the bow back and forth, patiently, making the stick spin in the leaves.

I watched, sleepily. "Just think," I said. "It's all gone."

"What?"

"Beethoven. Mozart. There's nobody but us to remember."

He wiped at his brow and peered up at the shining comet. "But we do remember. I think that's why we've been brought here. I think we're at a unique moment in the history of the solar system; and we've been brought back. As witnesses."

"...And what about all the music we never heard, all the books we never read... Gone, as if they never existed." I felt brittle; my words were a kind of shell around a cold loneliness. "And all the other stuff, the junk that filled our heads from day to day. The Church of the Latter Day Saints. The Inland Revenue. All gone. My God, George, nobody else in all creation remembers 'Born Too Late' by The Ponytails."

"Even I don't remember it," he said, still spinning his stick.

"Let the Builders try reconstructing The Ponytails." My snout twitched. "At least I know I'm not insane. Nobody could possibly dream up The Ponytails. George, I can smell the damndest -"

A thread of smoke rose from the pit of leaves. "I've done it," George breathed.

For a long, frozen moment we both stared. Then George threw his sails around the smouldering heap and blew; smoke billowed around his face. Frantically I fed dead leaves into the embryonic fire, cursing as my nubs of fingers crushed the stuff.

A single flame licked at a leaf.

We howled and danced.

Then it started to rain.

I stared up in disbelief. A squat, malevolent cloud had drifted across the sun's red face, and the first drops were thumping against the leaves. For a few seconds the burning leaves hissed; then our little hearth was smothered, and only scraps of soggy foliage were left.

George just folded up.

I turned my streaming face up to the sky. "Why are you doing this? We were long dead. Why didn't you leave us be?"

Of course there was no answer; and at that moment I knew that this was real, that I was here forever, that there would never be an answer.

What happened next is... vague.

I tore through my world in a mist of rage. I kicked apart George's fire, smashed holes in our hut. I bit, scratched and tore at the world-tree, hurting it in a hundred tiny, futile ways. I dropped to the forest floor and shoved over my longitudinal trails. I rolled in the mulch, howling and tearing my flesh.

Then, bloody, trailing mulch, I hauled myself back to the treetop. I flipped around a branch - the dying sun, the hated world-tree, the comet, all whirled about me - and I let go and flew high into the air. For a few seconds, at the top of my arc, I hung with mouth wide and limbs outstretched, suspended between leaf-ball world and sun; the comet filled my eyes, shining more brightly than ever.

I pulled my sails close around me.

The wind of my fall plucked at my fur, and I wished beyond hope to be dashed against the ground.

Once more I lay on my back, staring up at a swollen sun. George's face hovered over me, anxious and concerned.

I tried to smile at him. Something caked around my mouth – blood? – crackled. "It didn't work out, did it, George?"

He shrugged, seeming embarrassed. "You're too light, Mr Beard. I'm sorry. Your terminal velocity wasn't nearly high enough. Although you made enough noise when you came crashing through the foliage."

I struggled to sit up; George bent over me and slipped his arms under my shoulders. "I'm sorry to cause you such trouble, George."

"I'm glad you're awake again." He squatted beside me and tilted up his head; his face looked like a coin in the red and silver light. "I think it's about to happen; I didn't want you to miss it."

"What's about to happen?"

"What we were brought here to see. For days that comet has been getting brighter. I think we're approaching a critical point..."

He brought me berries, and we sat side by side in the leaves and branches, staring up at a comet which billowed like a flag in a breeze.

It came quite suddenly.

The comet head swelled – and then exploded; silver fire poured around our tree world. We cried out and threw ourselves into the leaves, peeking from under our sails at a sky gone mad.

Within minutes the blaze faded, leaving only wisps glowing pink in the light of the sun. Where the comet's head had been a handful of glowing rocks drifted. And already the glorious tail, shorn of the nucleus which had fuelled it, was dispersing.

George and I crept closer together, shivering. I said, "What the hell was that?"

"The death of a comet," George whispered. "The sun has already destroyed the planets; now it is pouring out enough heat to flash the comets to steam. Soon a shell of water molecules will collect around the sun. Water lines were seen in the spectra of red giants by astronomers in our time..." He pulled his cloak-sail tight around him. "It's the last death of the solar system, you see, Mr Beard. That's what the Builders brought us to witness: to mark in our own way."

Now only muddy sunlight obscured the stars – but here and there I could see objects bigger than stars, patches of red and green like distant toys. I pointed them out to George. "What do you suppose they are? More observers?"

George shrugged. I stared at the enigmatic forms, wondering what strange, baffled creatures, clumsily reconstructed as we had been, were cowering beneath the violent sky.

"Anyway," George said, "what do we do now?"

I shrugged and picked at a leaf. "How long before the sun swallows us too?"

He frowned. "I don't think that will be a problem. We must be shielded somehow. Otherwise the sunlight that boiled that comet would have scorched this little world dry. So perhaps we've got years. Centuries, even. I don't suppose the Builders will care what we do."

I sniffed; it seemed colder without the comet glow. "I guess the first thing is to fix the house."

"We can do a lot with fire, you know," George mused. "We can harden wood for a start. Make better tools. And perhaps we can go down to the surface, try to clear through the mulch to the bedrock. There might be metal ores."

"Yes... And we ought to think about finding some substitute for paper. Bark, or chewed wood. We'll write down what we know before it dies with us." I pointed at the discs in the sky. "One day our kids will travel out there and meet the Builders' other victims. Maybe they will confront the Builders themselves. And they have to be able to tell our story."

George scratched his ear. "What kids?"

"I think we have something to discuss, George."

It wasn't easy. All those sails kept getting in the way. And the first time it was more like relieving an itch.


And, my God, it was embarrassing.

But it got better. And I couldn't believe how fast the kids grew.

Stephen Baxter has appeared frequently in *Interzone* of late – see his novella "The Baryonic Lords" which we serialized in issues 49 and 50. His first science-fiction novel, *Raft*, was recently published by Grafton Books to some acclaim. He is now hard at work on a trilogy of novels based on his "Xeelee" stories. Steve lives near High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.

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"I Keep Coming Back!"

Stan Nicholls talks to Robert Silverberg

Robert Silverberg's relationship with science fiction has not always been an easy one. He turned his back on the genre several times, his longest hiatus occurring in the mid-1970s.

Was it the state of the field itself or the way it was published that brought this about? "It was what the field had become. The seventies saw the beginning of the triumph of garbage. We had just had the Perry Rhodan stuff go through the United States with enormous popularity, and *Star Wars* was about to arrive. Everything was being juvenilized.

"I had spent ten or fifteen years pulling myself up from early hackwork into novels that were ever deeper, ever more complex, and they were all going out of print. Then they were gone. I thought, 'If this is the reward for merit I can find something else to do.'"

As far as his writing was concerned he was totally inactive for four and a half to five years. "But during that time I was busy doing other things. I was constructing a garden, for instance. Well, after I spent my planting-the-garden period, I came back. And there's still plenty of garbage around, there's tons of garbage around; in fact if anything it's gotten worse, with the onslaught of the formula fantasy trilogies and all this Celtic stuff. But what I discovered in my post-retirement period is that I can go on doing my own thing. The books stay in print now and they are published well by my present publishers in the United States and England. So, as long as I'm happy doing my thing, why should I care what happens to the garbage?"

These days, Silverberg is firmly back in harness. His output is considerably less prolific than in earlier times perhaps, but he does have a novel pending, one planned-out and two more in the pipeline. He has also embarked on three collaborations with Isaac Asimov. The first, *Nightfall*, recently appeared here in paperback, and the second, *Child of Time*, in hardcover.

Asimov is another writer who took a break from the field. "Isaac, although he has never for a moment ceased writing, abandoned science fiction himself

for ten or twelve years, and worked only on scientific books in the sixties and early seventies. So we've each had our periods of turning away from that which we are best known for."

Silverberg read the original "Nightfall" when he was eleven years old, and it had an enduring effect on him. Published in 1941 by *Astounding*, the story is seen as a classic, leading several polls of best sf shorts.

He planned to write a 20,000 word novella, a companion piece to be published alongside the original on its fiftieth anniversary, but the idea mutated into a full-blown collaborative novel. "I'm not sure how that came about at this late date, because so many discussions went back and forth," he says, "but I offer tentatively the notion that it was the editor's idea finally that an original novel would be more appropriate."

"I found it an interesting intellectual experiment to get into someone else's story on that level of intensity. So I was receptive to the idea; and I think what kicked off *Nightfall* was Gregory Benford telling me he would like to do a piece inspired by *Against the Fall of Night*. Almost simultaneously a friend of Asimov's called me and said, 'You and Isaac are old friends, would you like to do a piece from some story of his?' I said if I were going to pick a story it would be 'Nightfall,' figuring I'd take the biggest challenge there is. Suddenly the telephone was ringing day and night, and by the time the noise settled down Isaac and I had agreed to the project."

The original story takes place on a planet, Lagash, with six suns in its sky. To the Lagashians darkness isn't some kind of novel experience, it is an inconceivable and terrifying prospect. Their psychological intolerance is so strong they even sleep in artificial light. "Darkness is as disagreeable to them as a motel room full of snakes would be for Indiana Jones," Silverberg says.

An astronomer, Beenay, and his journalist friend Theron discover that an eclipse occurs once every 2049 years, and another is due. For just over a day five of the suns are on one side of the planet. But this time the remaining sun, a red dwarf, is also obscured

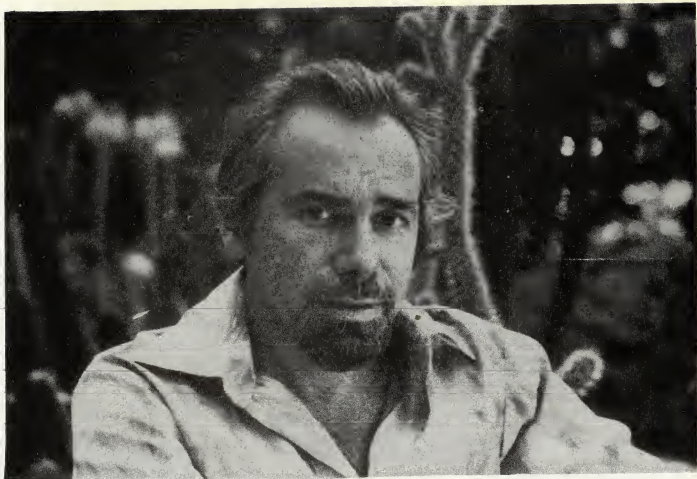
when a planet-sized dark body arrives and shields it. The resulting night is not the only threat to everyone's sanity; they also have to contend with a further unknown phenomenon — the stars.

What did he hope to add to the story by expanding it? "Well, it was not so much a question of adding as far as I was concerned," Silverberg explains. "After all the story is quite as originally conceived. What I wanted was to re-experience that story as a writer. I wanted to feel it from the inside. I wanted to get into it and see what it felt like to be the writer of 'Nightfall.' And so I did, and it was extraordinary to be moving the characters Theron and Beenay around as though they were mine."

From Isaac's point of view there were two primary advantages to collaborating. One was that he didn't want to write a science fiction novel that year; he wanted to do a history of science. This was a way to have a science-fiction book generated that would be an authentic Isaac Asimov novel, with relatively little time taken up by Asimov, leaving him free to write his history of science, which he did. The other attraction for him was that Isaac and I are very old friends, we've known each other thirty-five years, and he wanted to see my version of his great story. He was curious about it.

"Isaac of course had already done the basic work — 'Nightfall,' the story. Because Isaac doesn't travel, and he lives 3000 miles away and I didn't feel like going to New York, we discussed by phone how the story, which takes place in only four or five hours on the eve of the eclipse, could be expanded into a novel. We swapped our ideas back and forth. He pointed out that the astronomy in the original story was somewhat out of whack and he would like a second chance at that. After those discussions I prepared an outline of twelve to fifteen pages breaking down the three sections of the new version of the story — before, during and after. I sent this to him. He meanwhile produced a sketch of the astronomical pattern, that he had had fifty years nearly to think about, and sent that to me."

"We each had some observations



about the other's work. I found something else that needed changing in the astronomy, although I would not set myself up scientifically over Isaac, but he agreed there was an aspect there that needed greater consistency. He made a few changes to the structure and plot. I then wrote the entire first draft of the novel incorporating his original story but making the necessary changes. When this was done I sent it to him and he went over it and made such changes as he wanted to make."

As might be expected, Asimov had the final say on what went in. "I don't have a lot of modesty about my literary abilities, nevertheless it's his story and anything he would feel unhappy about he had veto power over. He did not in fact use this veto power. It was an extremely harmonious collaboration. We've now done a second collaboration, you know, and he has exercised his veto power there in one instance, and it has to do not with the story itself but with an epigraph, which contained a word he didn't like. 'I don't want that word in our book,' he said, and I replied, 'Oh, come on, Isaac, it's not very troublesome.' And he said, 'Well, it's troublesome to me.' So I backed away." What this word may have been is not forthcoming!

Surprisingly little revision was necessary on *Nightfall* in order to unify

their respective contributions. "No, not between us. There was some revision involved in *Nightfall*, but it was initiated by Gollancz [publisher of the British hardback edition]. Despite putting both our formidable minds together on the book we still managed to get a scientific detail wrong. Some very clever person at Gollancz spotted it. I spoke to [editor] Richard Evans about this, and it was not Richard who caught it; it was somebody who read the manuscript, and found a big inconsistency we had built in, and at the last minute unscrambled it. But so far as the Asimov/Silverberg part went; no, once we had worked out what the content of the story was we didn't need to revise. In my own draft I was able to catch the Asimovian lucidity of tone pretty easily. His style is a very transparent one."

How would he define a transparency of style? "What I mean is that the story should flow from line to line, from paragraph to paragraph. There are technical things I have always done in my writing that makes each paragraph grow organically out of the one before, so that nobody stops and stumbles and puts this book down. So I believe in a great transparency of style myself; I think the reader should be able to follow what's going on. Isaac does the same thing."

"The balance of dialogue and exposition, all of these matters, we see eye

to eye on. I made a conscious effort to follow his familiar style, because I didn't want there to be a jarring discontinuity between the middle section, which is about 97% pure Asimov, and the two flanking sections. Therefore it was hardly necessary to do a lot of stylistic editing afterwards."

"I would think the voice of the novel is Asimovian. Consciously so on my part. The things I specifically contributed other than in terms of plot have to do with the archaeological theme, the new characters, who are largely my work, and the emotional responses of the characters to the situation of insanity that darkness produces. So I hardly feel that the book is simply an act of ventriloquism on my part; there's Isaac's contribution and there's my contribution."

The necessity to alter the astronomical details is self-evident — so much more is known about the subject now than fifty years ago. But the name of the planet was changed to Kalgash at Silverberg's instigation. "You may know of my background in archaeology. Well, Isaac's original name for the planet was Lagash, and Lagash was one of the cities of Sumer in what is now Iraq. I said to him that in calling the planet Lagash we would be sending confusing signals to the knowledgeable reader, if there is such a thing, implying some connection between the planet and prehistoric Mesopotamia. Why do

that? And we changed one or two character names, for similar reasons; otherwise we kept them the same. Where elements of needless confusion and unwanted ambiguity existed I asked for them to be changed. Isaac was happy to go along with that."

Silverberg points out that mention of Earth at the end of the original story has been cut. "That reference was not written by Asimov. It was written by John W. Campbell Jr, who of course edited the magazine that published the story. Isaac was twenty-one years old when the story appeared, and didn't have a lot of clout, so he simply swallowed his wrath and allowed that paragraph to stay in. And then in some kind of concession to the existence of the original story as artefact he never removed it. But he thought it was inappropriate, and I agreed wholeheartedly, so we dropped it."

He feels Campbell's addition was "...a careless bit of didacticism, a silly aside to the readers of *Astounding Science Fiction*. Of course there can't be any connection with our planet and Earth; Kalgash doesn't know any other planet exists. The Kalgashians think their little solar system is the entire universe."

The second collaboration, *Child of Time*, based on Asimov's story "The Ugly Little Boy," is already written and delivered. "The manuscript, along with the final revisions, such as there are, was done last Fall. The book has been in Gollancz's hands since about Christmas time, and I imagine publication will happen this Summer." As to the third: "I can tell you it will be a completely original book, it will not be based on an old novella this time. I can't tell you more than that because we're still working on the plot and we haven't yet come to final agreement on what happens and why."

One similarity Silverberg agrees he shares with Asimov is that they are both workaholics. Are they alike in other ways? For example, Asimov has gained a reputation in recent years for being something of a pessimist. Would Silverberg describe himself similarly? "No, paradoxically enough. I'm the one who's been accused of writing all manner of dark and troublesome things, and he has not. For all my grimness of tone and reserve of manner I actually think things will work out all right if we are reasonable human beings. But it always brings smiles to people's faces when I say I'm basically optimistic about humanity and Earth and civilization."

"By nature I'm quite reserved and ironical. Isaac is forthcoming and extroverted. Yet beneath I think we are both secretly shy. He is far more of an ebullient personality than I am, much more outgoing, but actually quite similar to me underneath. As to which of

us is the pessimist; well, I don't think either of us really. But a fundamentally uneasy view of the world and its precariousness is masked by his high-spirited outer nature; and my basic conviction that if we keep plodding along doing things sensibly everything will work out is masked by my outer glumness."

As far as Silverberg's solo efforts are concerned, a new novel has appeared from Grafton this year, called *The Face of the Waters*. "It's the first thing I wrote after *Nightfall*. *Face of the Waters* is - what can I call it? - it's a sea adventure, but rather more in the direction of Joseph Conrad than C.S. Forester. It takes place on a planet that has no land surface at all. I would describe it as driving for a transcendental conclusion which is somewhat an outgrowth of my thinking of the early seventies."

"Beyond that; well, I'm just drawing a deep breath to get started on the next novel, *Kingdoms of the Wall*. I'll be writing it this summer. It's a mountaineering story set on an alien planet and told from the point of view of the fairly primitive alien climbing this mountain."

"My approach to starting a book is both schematic and instinctive, let's say. What usually comes to me first is an image, or a very basic concept, or even a title. The entire story of *Dying Inside* came to me in about a tenth of a second after the title did. Suddenly I had a title standing there, *Dying Inside*, and I looked at it and said, 'What kind of novel goes with that?' Before I knew what was happening a novel was arriving. That's a matter of instinct I believe."

"With *The Face of the Waters* the vision of the planet entirely covered with water was there; in *Kingdoms of the Wall*, well, I was imagining looking up at a mountain thirty, forty miles high, populated its entire distance by strange and inexplicable creatures."

"After that moment of instinctual discovery, then comes the breakdown of the plot that presents itself to me in its coherent parts. But if I don't have the beginning and the end I can't start the story. I need to know where it begins and I certainly need to know where I'm going."

Would it be fair to say that, although he has written in other fields and will presumably continue to do so, his energies will primarily be directed towards sf? "Apparently so."

I have to comment that he says this in a rather resigned sort of way. "Yes, because I keep coming back! I've had a very complex and sometimes angry relationship with science fiction."

"I walked out several times. About 1959 or '60 I said, 'All right, I've had enough of this,' and went away and wrote the archaeological books. I dabbed in mild forms of pornography;

I did anything but science fiction. After a few years of that, Fred Pohl, who was editing a magazine then, said, 'Why don't you do some science fiction for me? I'll let you write anything you please.' I couldn't resist that, so I came back."

"Then in the middle 1970s I went away far more angry and upset than before and stopped writing entirely. When that was done I went back again, and basically I've written nothing but science fiction for the last decade. Now I'm contracted to Bantam/Doubleday for four more novels. This will take me close to the end of the century. So I think the virus is ineradicable."

interzone BACK ISSUES

Issues 1, 5, 7, 17 and (just recently) 22 are out of print (but see below for short-term exceptions). All other back issues are still available from *Interzone's* main editorial address at £2.50 each (postage inclusive); £2.80 each overseas (\$5 USA). Please make your cheques or postal orders payable to *Interzone* and send them to 217 Preston Drive, Brighton BN1 6FL. We can also accept payment by Access (MasterCard) or Visa. (For US customers using cards, please note payments will be deducted at the £ sterling rate.)

SPECIAL NOTICE

A few slightly shop-soiled copies of some out-of-print *Interzone*s have recently come to light in a former editor's attic. They include a whole boxful of issue 1, and small handfuls of issues 5 and 7. Until the supply is exhausted we are selling these at the above rates - first come, first served. We anticipate issue 1 will be in stock for some time, but the other two will be gone very quickly, so please name alternative back-issue choices when ordering either of these rare items.

Dust to Dust to...

Martha A. Hood

The afternoon sun shone through the windshield, blinding Susan. She shoved her too-long bangs from her eyes, only to have them fall again. The desert was getting bleaker, whiter with the mile. Jerry, her husband, drove the couple's Honda, and they rode in silence. He held his head in perfect profile to her, as though he were the half face of a crescent moon.

They hadn't spoken for miles. Susan reflected that the desert was like that; it drained the colours from your life into itself, until you had nothing to say, and it seemed as though quiet was the only way things could be.

But Ginny, their baby, broke the silence with a cry. She had just awakened, and Susan knew that she wanted them to stop and release her from the confines of her rear-facing car seat. She was a pretty baby, with an uncommon amount of curly, light brown hair, and wide-spaced blue-green eyes. She was dressed in a pink sunsuit with a white bunny rabbit on the front. She was four and a half months old, riding west on I-40 with her parents, on her way home from a vacation at the Grand Canyon, her first big trip.

Then Jerry did something strange. He got off I-40, and turned onto 93, towards Phoenix.

The silent world was suddenly noisy. Not just the baby's crying, but the whir of the tyres on the pavement, the hum of the engine as Jerry accelerated, and the pounding in Susan's temples.

"What are you doing?" she asked. When Jerry didn't answer, she knew. "Oh no," she said. "We're not going to Phoenix. Not with the baby."

"Why not? We haven't been there since before you were pregnant with her. I want to try it again."

It was true. Susan had refused to go to Phoenix, or to take any of the dust (it was the same thing; there was no going to Phoenix without taking the dust), as soon as she had found out she was pregnant. "Jerry, what is the point?"

"He was my best and oldest friend. That is the point."

"Jerry, Doc was murdered. That is reality. That will always be reality. The dust is nothing but hallucination." Susan did believe that, though willing to admit that the dust was the strangest drug she had ever run across. No other drugs took you back in time. None gave even the illusion of doing so.

Ginny's cries grew louder. Susan twirled in her seat, reached around, and stuck a finger out for Ginny to

grab. The baby took it, and sucked greedily. "We have to stop," Susan said. "Ginny's hungry."

Jerry's hands gripped the wheel, in a perfect 10-and-2 position. "Hallucination or not, I can't stand failing, over and over again. I feel like I should be able to save him. Just once. I feel I should be able to make it come out right."

The baby sucked and kicked.

"I feel the dust is taking us somewhere, Suze. Each time, I feel it's trying to teach us how to get it right."

The dust did seem to have a will of its own, if only in the way it kept leading them back to itself.

Ginny spat out Susan's finger and howled.

"Jerry, the baby's really hungry."

"Okay, okay," he said. "Okay."

Two and a half hours later, they pulled into a parking lot at the University. It was dark. There weren't many night classes, so there were plenty of parking spaces.

Susan snuggled Ginny in a front pack, while Jerry pulled a small metal canister from the spare tyre compartment of the Honda's trunk.

The lights overhead illuminated the canister, and the stars, crescent moons, ringed planets, and spiral galaxies that were painted all over it. Susan was uneasy. She thought of telling Jerry to go by himself this time.

But then only he would be there to re-encounter the dust again – or would she be too?

She shook her head to free it of fuzzy thoughts. It was just another drug, she told herself. And maybe this would be the last time.

"I want to try it right outside the classroom this time," said Jerry. "I want to be right behind him. Timing is everything."

Indeed, timing had been their downfall before. The stuff took them back, but always to exactly the same moment: approximately five hours and sixteen minutes before their first discovery of the dust. That the drug's timespan also included – just barely – Doc's murder, was merely dumb luck.

As they mounted the steps of the Humanities building, Susan noted that Ginny had fallen asleep in the front pack, head turned to one side, resting between Susan's breasts.

From one open door, they heard bits of a professor's lecture. "Hume had argued that...the notion of cause..."

Doc's classroom – where he had been teaching Philosophy 101 the day he was shot – was empty and dark. Jerry and Susan had been inside the classroom on that day, many months ago, auditing Doc's lecture. They'd been visiting from L.A., taking a few days vacation, just like now.

"...so that cause itself rests on mere intellectual supposition, rather than on any perceived reality..."

Jerry took Susan's elbow, and led her over to a drinking fountain, ten feet away.

Jerry unpopped the canister lid and handed it to Susan. He rolled a single green ball of dust – smaller than a golf ball – into the palm of his hand. He handed the empty canister to Susan, who snapped the lid back on.

Jerry cradled the dust in both palms.

Susan patted Ginny's bottom. They would be back in twenty seconds or so, realtime, although the subjective experience would seem to last over nine hours. Meanwhile, the dust itself, the very stuff they were about to breathe in, would somehow reappear, back inside the decorated canister.

Jerry held his palms under Susan's chin, and brought his face close. Susan thought maybe she could just pretend to breathe in. But then somehow it was too late. She was breathing, for real.

Susan had never done cocaine, or any hard stuff. She was not really a drug user; that was not how she thought of herself. Drugs of any kind hit her hard, and the first wave of the dust always gave her an ugly rush, a sickening, wrenching thing that she hated.

She heard something like a pop, and Ginny disappeared, front pack and all.

The light changes – first, darkening, then lightening. It is a few minutes past four, and Susan and Jerry are nineteen months younger.

A pale, narrow-chested, floppy-footed youth has just passed them, and he is walking slowly down the otherwise empty hall. His shoes make a squishy sound on the linoleum, and he is fumbling in the pocket of his jacket.

This time, unlike all the times they failed, Jerry doesn't hesitate. He spins, takes two running steps, and tackles the youth, just as he is turning in the open door of Doc's class. As soon as Jerry touches him, Susan starts to scream.

The youth fumbles for his gun, but Jerry, knowing that it is a gun in that pocket, grabs his wrist and pulls his arm back until the youth's screams rival Susan's.

Doc, a big bear of a man, comes to the door. Behind his black beard, his face goes ghostly pale.

"Get help!" Jerry yells. "He's got a gun! He came to kill you!"

Doc's students crowd behind him, and six break through. Five of them – and Susan – help Jerry to hold the youth down, while the sixth student goes to find help.

The youth lies prone, one student straddling his butt, two, holding his legs, one, his shoulders. Yet, he manages to lift his head. "You bastard!" he screams at Doc.

Doc frowns, and squats, eye-to-eye with his attacker. "Julio. What's this all about?"

The youth struggles against his restrainers. Tears run down his childishly red cheeks. "I thought you

knew something, man! I thought you had the fucking answers."

Doc brings his hand to his forehead. "Shit," he says, looking at the floor.

"You're a phony!" the boy screams. "A hypocrite! An intellectual glutton who's pigged-out on his own bull for so long that your fingernails are brown."

Doc looks up. "I'm sorry you feel that way."

When the police and campus security arrive, Doc turns his back on everyone and goes back inside the classroom. A blob of chalk dust mars the seat of his pants.

"Pretentious bastard! Arrogant shithead! Fascist popinjay!"

"SHUT UP!" yells a cop, the largest of them, as he handcuffs the boy.

Another cop is taking a statement from a student, while a campus security man looks on. "Julio had a thing for Doc," the student says. "Last week, I heard him invite Doc out to his car – to listen to a tape and to smoke some stuff – that was what he said. Doc turned him down."

The whole time the cops are taking Susan's and Jerry's statements, she feels like a paper doll, something that can be seen through if held up to light, two-dimensional. It is all so weird, so different from any other time with the dust.

Jerry puts his arm around her. The police, the youth, and the students leave. Doc comes up and flings an arm around the neck of each of them, and gives them a hug. "I wondered where you guys had got off to. One minute you were in class, then the next time I looked up, you weren't. My God, how did you know?"

Jerry gives him the same story they gave the cops. "Suze was feeling funny for a moment. We went out to get some air. The guy was out here, with his gun half-drawn."

Doc eyes her with concern.

"I'm fine now," she assures him.

Doc smiles. "Don't forget, I've got half a dozen doves in the freezer for tonight. You're staying one more night, right?"

Right. One more night. Susan remembers the doves, remembers that the chairman of the philosophy department shot them, and gave them to Doc as a gift. Well, now, finally, the sixth or seventh dust trip, they would be cooked and eaten.

Six doves, bubbling in the crock pot. These birds have had luckier days.

Six doves on the table, two on each plate.

Doc swallows a bite hurriedly, anxious, as always, to make his point. "Julio's father left when he was two. His mother – well, he's vague about her, but she wasn't around much either, and I get the impression she was schizophrenic. He was raised by his grandmother, who, from what I can understand, was a well-meaning lady, but whom Julio positively detested – resented, I mean – for not being who he wanted her to be. Like he resented me for not being..." He lowers his fork, and lets it drop. "Just bad luck on his part, to grow up in an environment so poisoned, he has little if any chance of getting himself straightened out. Just random chance, like getting shot." He looks at his remaining dove. "Or being saved. Or being born in the first place."



His fork freezes in mid-air. His face pales. For a moment, he just sits there. The air begins to waver, and Doc recedes, as though they are all out in the middle of the desert at high noon, and Doc has become a distant mirage.

Doc drops his fork. The crash of stainless steel on porcelain shatters the wavy lines and brings his visage forward. He is angry. "You idiots! What kind of asshole thing have you gone and done?" He covers his face with his hands. "Fuck. I was shot, wasn't I? I was killed, and you found the dust, and you did the dust - God damn, I don't want to give it to you." He gives a deep sigh. "You're my friends."

When he stands, he holds onto the table as though he is having stomach cramps. Nevertheless, he does stand, and Susan and Jerry follow him to the bedroom. Doc walks over to his dresser, and stops.

The light from the single lamp by the bed shines through its old shade with a light so dim, it is like that of a candle. He has books stacked everywhere - on the bedstand, on the floor, on the single hard chair by the narrow twin bed. The walls are bare. Doc's head makes ghostly, darting shadows on them.

He pulls the canister from the top drawer of his dresser. The comets, stars, crescents, ringed planets and spiral galaxies seem to leap out in the dim light; the moons are forever trying to fall into their ringed planets, the planets into their suns, and the suns, into their galaxies' cores.

When Doc turns to face them, Susan sees he has tears in his eyes.

"Here." He hands the dust to Jerry, and glances at his watch. He snuffles his nose and turns to reach for

a Kleenex. "I trust you are within your allowed time parameters for finding the dust. I've always figured them to be about a minute and a half, either way."

Jerry holds the canister close into his chest. "Dust. That's funny. That's what we call it too."

Doc shrugs. "That's what it looks like." He smiles weakly. "Thanks for coming back for me. I'll never forget it."

Susan laughs, needing to break the tension. "You won't believe how clumsy we were. We had to come back... I don't know... six or seven times, before we got it right."

To her dismay, this news makes Doc break into sobs, and he sinks to the floor.

Jerry shoots her an accusing glance. He puts the canister on the dresser; he and Susan kneel, and comfort their friend, with hugs, pats on the back, and soft words.

Finally, Jerry gets up, and pulls something else out of Doc's drawer - a baggie full of grass. From another part of the drawer, he pulls out some papers. He starts rolling.

"Promise me something," Doc says. "Don't let that stuff ruin things for you. If you haven't already."

Susan hugs his shoulders. "It's not your fault we got mixed up in it. It's just that, after Julio shot you, we started worrying about the police. What if they came by the apartment and searched it? So we emptied your stash drawer - and we found the canister."

Jerry hands her a joint; she takes a hit and passes it to Doc. "It was pretty funny, really," she says. "Trying to figure out what to do with it. Jerry here rolled it up in a paper and tried to light it."

To Susan's relief, Doc starts to laugh. "I don't know how we came just to breathe it in like we did," Susan says.

Doc exhales a hit. "The dust seems to know what it wants you to do with it."

As they get themselves and Doc off the floor, into the living room, Susan and Jerry tell him about how, that first time, they found themselves suddenly in daylight, in his apartment, and how, when they saw what time it was, they raced over to the school, only to find that he had been shot all over again.

"When we came to, we thought it had been some sort of dream," says Jerry, lighting a second joint. "The weird thing being, of course, that we had had exactly the same dream, down to the last detail."

"And you had your single ball of dust back again," Doc points out. "That should have clued you that this was no ordinary stuff."

Jerry shrugs. "We talked about it." "We didn't check the time either, that first time," Susan says. "We didn't realize that we'd been 'gone' for just a matter of seconds."

"The next time we took it, we were home, in L.A.," Jerry says.

"We did it on impulse that time," Susan adds. "You see, we were shocked to find it in there — we just popped the canister, and there it was. We thought we'd done it all the first time."

Jerry sighs. "Then, once we were on the stuff, saw where we were — still in L.A. — and what date it was, we got it in our heads that that was how the dust got back to us each time."

"Good guess." Doc pulls the cork from a bottle of wine. His eyes widen, as they describe the rush to the airport, running to grab a plane, the maniacal drive in the rented Toyota. When they're done, he bows his head and cradles his cup of wine. "That's how it is. You keep finding it, over and over. You can't get rid of it until someone comes and takes it away from you." He drinks some wine. "I'm free of it now," he says. "Now, it's yours."

Jerry lights another joint, and they tell Doc about the other times they did the dust, how, after that second time, Jerry got the idea of actually being able to make things come out... different.

"The third time, we did it in your classroom — when it was empty," says Susan. "But of course, everything happened so fast..."

"Nothing to do but watch it all over again," Jerry says.

The next time, they tried it at the entrance to the Humanities building, and then, the times after that...

The conversation shifts, without Susan's full awareness.

Suddenly Doc is giggling. "Tell me who wins the next Superbowl."

As the men talk about sports, and Susan tunes out again. She is pretty stoned, and a little drunk.

But just after Jerry finishes filling Doc in on the next two World Series, she says, "Oh, Doc, we have a little girl. Her name's Ginny. She's four and a half months old and she's beautiful."

Doc stops laughing. "That's great. I'd love to see her. I really would, Suze."

Susan starts to say, of course he will. But Jerry breaks in, to tell Doc something about the upcoming NBA playoffs.

The next thing she realizes is that she and Jerry are spreading a quilt on Doc's floor, getting ready for bed. She wonders about the gaps she's having; it could be the dust, but is probably, she supposes, the grass and the wine. She's feeling pretty sober now, though.

Doc, however, is in bad shape. He is sprawled on the sofa, one foot propped on the coffee table, the other, flat on the floor.

"Imagine," he says, "my grandfather actually tried to tell the Soviet authorities about the dust. He took them the fucking canister, and told them he found it at the Tunguska site, for God's sake." His speech is slow, deliberate, but is not slurred. "They wouldn't take it. Told him he was crazy."

Jerry pauses for a moment, before tossing down the second of two pillows.

"He missed by this much," Doc holds up a shaky hand, thumb and forefinger a smidgin apart, "this much, being thrown into a Soviet loony bin. He never would've met my grandmother. I never would have been born." He gives a short laugh and his hand falls to his side.

Jerry grabs Doc under the armpits, and straightens him up. "Come on pal. Time for sleepy-bye."

Doc nods and sighs. "He thought the dust was alive. Came here from the stars. All in that little canister, painted with stars and planets and moons and galaxies. Painted by little green men from Mars."

Susan and Jerry lie on Doc's living room floor. Vertical seams of light outline the heavy apartment drapes. Otherwise, it is dark and quiet.

Jerry lays a hand on Susan's breast. She giggles. She is at that point with the grass and the wine where life seems pretty much perfect.

Jerry giggles back at her and sticks his tongue in her ear.

They roll around on the floor as quietly as they can, at first stifling laughter; later, sighs and cries. In the sticky fluids of their bodies, two hundred million sperm swim into a uterine void. Hundreds of million shooting stars, flying from the cosmic void, burst into flame, and sear the backs of Susan's eyelids.

It is over.

She came to in a parking lot. She was pulling a stroller from the trunk of the Honda. It was night time. A tiny gust of wind lifted her hair from her shoulders. Who she was, where she was, and what she was doing — all of these things came to her in discrete bits, like pills from a bottle.

She was Susan, and she was returning from vacation, with her husband and her daughter. She was standing in the visitor parking area of Doc's apartment, because Jerry had decided that, as they were not that far away, they should pay a visit. Jerry had left her here with the car, to go get Doc so that he could help them with the luggage.

Oh yes. They had done some dust. They had saved Doc's life.

She had a dim sense that she was supposed to be somewhere else — in the Humanities building at the University, with Ginny asleep in her front pack.

Well, never mind. She unfolded the stroller, and closed the trunk. She wheeled the stroller around, to



the right rear door. She opened the door, and reached in for Ginny.

The first thing she noticed was that the car seat was bigger than it should have been, and faced forward, as it would for an older child. Then she noticed the child.

It was a girl, about ten months old. She had straight, sparse, reddish-blond hair (the colour Susan's had been as a baby). She had large, very round, and lovely grey-blue eyes. She wore a lavender sunsuit with a pink butterfly on the bib, and had an enchanting smile. But she wasn't Ginny, and Susan screamed.

The stranger, the baby, seeing her mother's horror, at first started to laugh, maybe thinking her mom was playing a game, and reached out for her. When her mother backed away, instead of scooping her into her arms, the baby's laughter stopped, and she started to cry.

Susan covered her eyes and screamed louder. She didn't want to see this baby or hear it crying or know how it felt when she wasn't the mother not really except in some other timeline, one that never happened except in some drug state she couldn't sober up from. She screamed until she ran out of breath. Jerry came running out from the apartments. An upstairs window opened; a man yelled, "Can you keep that kid quiet, please? We're trying to watch a movie." The window slid and slammed shut.

The baby went on crying.

Jerry smiled tentatively. He raised his voice. "Doc left a note on the door. He'll be back in twenty minutes or so."

The little one was howling now, mouth wide and

trembling, tongue quivering, tears running in streams down each side of her face. Susan swallowed. Now Jerry, coming closer, was looking at Susan, and at the baby. She saw the understanding cross his face, and then the pained look, wordlessly asking her what she was going to do.

She felt a little dizzy. She forced a smile at the baby, but the girl was crying too hard to see.

Susan unsnapped the buckle, lifted the strap, and lifted the baby out.

This little girl was huskier, and wigglier, than Ginny.

Susan held her close, until the baby's sobs dwindled, and shuddered into a sigh.

Susan stroked the girl's hair, fought back another flood of tears, and said, "I want to go home. Now."

Guilty-looking Jerry, frowning, wringing his hands, said, "But Doc's expecting..."

"Now. I don't want to see Doc again, as long as I live."

Jerry nodded, not looking at her, and went to fold up the stroller. Susan put the baby back in the car seat.

A minute later, Jerry turned the key in the ignition, and the car hummed to life.

She and Jerry spoke not a word to one another, for the rest of the drive home.

Martha A. Hood wrote "Learning the Language" (*Interzone* 42), which was a popular tale with our readership. She lives in Irvine, California, and has sold stories to a few other sf and fantasy magazines. We hope to see more from her soon.

Tube Corn

Television Reviews by Wendy Bradley

Interactive television is something we keep hearing about but which never seems to turn up in the shops, although I must say I was encouraged by the equipment the villain had in *The Hard Way* which seemed to allow him to draw electronically all over Michael J. Fox's face on the screen, a gadget devoutly to be wished.

However, as a service to Interzone readers, here are a few suggestions of ways to extract the maximum enjoyment from your TV in the here and now, without the need for any equipment other than a regular television, equipped with teletext if possible, and a video that allows you to view programmes in fast forward or fast rewind.

First, the Concentrated Episode. Given that life is too short to watch another episode of *Macgyver* and yet one in ten episodes has a cute bit worth watching (this series' was the female villain who had *Macgyver* at bay, turned out to be a whiz at karate and beat the crap out of him until he cunningly fooled her by moving to the side

when she came at him with a flying drop kick, so that she plunged past him out of a plate glass window. From a tower block.) Easy. The solution? Video the episode and watch it on fast forward, filling in the plot as you go:

"Villainy villainy, plot plot, chase scene, chase scene, gadget gadget, rescue rescue, happy ending happy ending." Score extra points if you can stop the video at exactly the ten second sound bite where the plot is being explained.

Secondly, there are hours of fun to be derived from a game of Fill in the Dialogue. You have seen this one on *Whose Line is It Anyway?* with all those bizarre movie clips to which they add their own surreal dialogue, but it is much more fun to do it straight. Either (Version A) turn down the sound altogether and make up your own dialogue for the entire programme or, subtler, there is Version B where you leave the sound on but try and say exactly the line the actor is going to say a fraction before he says it. Warn-

ing: do not try either of these unless everyone in the room consents to take part or you may finish up seriously injured by flying ornaments.

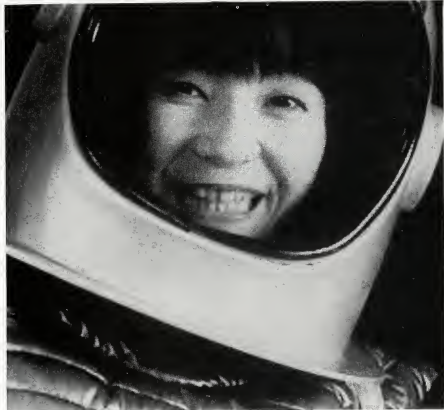
If you have teletext and haven't yet watched a subtitled programme, such as perhaps *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, with page 888 playing I highly recommend it, as the teletext subtitles for the deaf tend to be of variable quality and even more variable timing. If you can bear to do without Patrick Stewart's dark brown voice you can reduce yourself to hysterics by turning off the sound and reading the dialogue yourself from the subtitles. No, I don't know why it's funny, but I guarantee that it is and it works with anything - soap operas, films, the news. You get an extra point if you get to say a swearword that is left in the subtitles and buzzed out of the soundtrack.

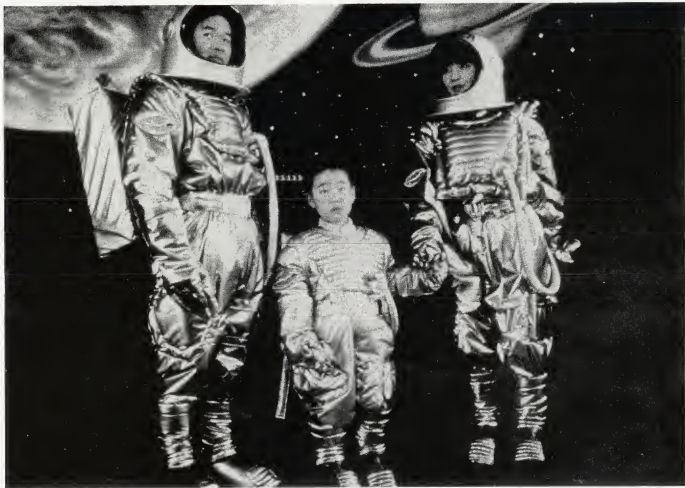
Then there is that perennial favourite, Guess the Age of the Programme. It works best, of course, with old movies but in either case without looking at the other clues (like the names and ages of the actors) check out the costumes and see how nearly you can guess the date the programme or movie was made. (Seventies Open University programmes have to be within two years for the prize to be awarded.)

Period piece or not makes no difference - cowboy films all set ostensibly in the 1880s still have the corseted waists and heaving bosoms, or flared jeans and eccentric sideburns, of the street clothes of the fifties or seventies or whenever they were made. So it is with the future: those miniskirts, that scarf, date the early years of *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who* as effectively as any copyright roman numeral.

Attitudes to the future date too. Who believes now in that vision of the future that is all bright rockets and helpful robots, unlimited resources and undaunted technofix?

"In the past people used to dream about the future." This was the opening sentence of the narration to Central TV's **Viewpoint 91: Japan Dreaming** which took as its theme the idea that the only country which still believes in the bright future of golden





age science fiction is Japan, and that Japan not only has a distinctive vision of the future but is actively working to make that vision into reality.

I found this an interesting idea but a disappointing programme. Somehow there is a mania at the moment for digging up pieces of fifties film about the future and making fun of just how wrong predictions can be, and regrettably that was how the programme chose to begin. We were then introduced to Sheridan Tatsuno who was credited as "Author of 'Created in Japan'." He told us that the Japanese are actively working on "Teletopia, Technopolis, Marinopolis, Aquatopia, Seatopia, Aeropolis, Alice City, Motopia, Geofront, Lunar Space, Lunar Hotels...it's almost as if the Japanese don't realize that it can't be done."

Well, personally I still feel cheated out of my trip to the moon and so I would be all in favour of a visit to a Lunar Hotel, but I was left at the end of the programme with little idea of whether any of these -opolises was actually being built or was just an idea on somebody's drawing board. We saw a cartoon of people arriving at a "Space Hotel" in 2020 and we heard the head of the corporation which is apparently working on the project talk about how they "would like to have" it finished by 2020 and were optimistic about

having the space plane necessary to begin building it by 2015. Maybe we shouldn't hold our breath.

Mr Tatsuno interested me too, particularly since his name also came up in the end credits as "consultant." There was a marked lack of writer's credit and I am pretty sure Lindsay Duncan was not making up all this syrupy narrative ("There is somewhere that can still afford to dream... the place the future will most probably look like - Japan") herself. Certainly we were started after enough hares to fill a book rather than a TV documentary, and I wonder whether we were in fact seeing an all-singing all-dancing version of Mr Tatsuno's thesis.

Some of the ideas were certainly worthy of pursuit. Fuzzy logic was dropped in with a remark about neural nets being used to programme computers to read handwriting, superconductors were trailed as the answer to "levitating" (in a magnetic field) silent trains which would be as fast as jets, but again it was unclear whether we were seeing a real working prototype or a set designer's mock-up, and we flirted with virtual reality in the throwaway line that "virtual reality allows you to play inside a computer's mind" which is one of those sentences which makes you long for the Broins Trust and someone to say "it all

depends what you mean by -."

We also heard Itsuko Hasegawa, the architect of what appeared to be a space-age theme-park, standing in front of her creation and saying "My definition of 'feminine' would be 'participation and co-operation by all kinds of people.' I believe Japan is moving in this direction." I personally believe that this must lose quite a lot in translation. Yet the idea that Japan is developing a somehow feminine or feminized culture is a different one worthy of pursuit, but a picture of a neon fish and the bald voice-over "Designing holograms - Japan is now teaching its children creativity" is not a great deal of help. Are the fish holograms? Are children designing them? Is this somehow teaching them creativity? How? Is this done systematically or are we seeing an exceptional teacher in an exceptional environment? Do all Japanese children have access to neon fish creation? I think we should have been told.

(Wendy Bradley)

Editor's note: Nick Lowe is resting this month; his regular film reviews should return next issue.

"I'm Not Making a Living... But I'm Doing It"

Gregory Feeley Talks to Howard Waldrop

Howard Waldrop's first published story appeared in 1972, but it was not until 1976 – with the appearance of "Mory Morgoret Rood-Groder" and "Custer's Lost Jump," the latter written with Steven Utley – that Waldrop's carefully crafted, idiosyncratic stories began to attract attention. Best known for "The Ugly Chickens," a memorable tale of an ornithologist who discovers evidence that dodos had been living in northern Mississippi as late as the 1920s, Waldrop has developed a small but enthusiastic readership, who subscribe to the limited first editions of his collections and wait impatiently for his too-infrequent stories.

Night of the Cooters: More Neat Stories by Howard Waldrop was recently published in the United States, and will appear in the UK from Legend this autumn. Waldrop recently discussed his work after returning from a trip to England, the setting for his forthcoming novel, *I, John Mandeville*.

Although you published a novel within a few years of the appearance of your first short story, you have published only one more in the seventeen years since. Nonetheless, a number of novels have been announced at various stages. Do you consider yourself primarily a story writer who does a novel every ten years or so, or do you wish to write them more frequently?

The answer is "Both." Yes, I wish I wrote novels more frequently, but I'm primarily a short-story writer. I'm doing longer stuff right now, novellas like "Fin de Cyclé" and "A Dozen Tough Jobs," and I'm doing something for Cheap Street that will be a novella. And all those novels I have announced over the years I still intend to write, with a couple of exceptions.

What are the exceptions?

There's the one I used to call *Mors Is Red*, about China's Great Leap Forward. Have you seen Mick Farren's *Mors – The Red Planet*? As soon as I looked at it, I knew: Somebody got there first.

You think that Mick Farren's version supplants yours?

It's just that I don't need to write it any more. But *I, John Mandeville* is still alive, although it has been twenty-three, twenty-four years since I got the idea. It and *Them Bones* came from the same place, an initial image of an early Renaissance Englishman in a tower watching a meteor fall. *Them Bones* was originally a lot different: it was the Leake section [the section set in North America of the Mound Builder civilization] except without time travel. It concerned a man in the late 1300s lost in America.

But *I, John Mandeville* is set in the mid-1300s, and I've got hundreds of pages of notes and four or five chapters. All I need to do is get the other things out of the way. That includes *The Moon World*, the novel I'm working on now. I'm really working on it, and am going to finish it this year.

So *The Moon World* will be the next novel to appear?

Well, that's the plan. It came to me in a flash late last year – must have been in September, since I read a section at Armadillocon in October.

You plan to go from initial conception to completion in one year?

Yes, I think so [laughs]. This is one of those kind that come, Bammo! Blam! One day! – in white heat. I've had short stories like that, but never a novel. Actually, it's not really white heat, otherwise I would have written it already, and I had other stuff to do first.

As I told Bruce Sterling and William Gibson, "I'd love to read *The Difference Engine*, but I can't right now." Because some of the same people have got to be in there, you know what I mean?

So *The Moon World* is set in the mid-19th century? Is it going to be about that Moon Hoax some New York newspaper did? [*New York Sun*, Aug-Sept 1835.]

Part of it, yeah. That's the jumping-off place, and the rest of the novel takes place thirty-four years later. And things happen a little differently in this world. So I told Bruce and Gibson, "I can't read your book, I don't want to know what you did." There are a couple of people who just have to be in there – I mean, if you're doing certain things in the 19th century in England or America, there are only a few people who could have done it. So I know that they had to do the same things.

So I guess you would call it a Steampunk novel. I was a bit worried about that, until Lew Shiner told me that I invented Steampunk twenty years ago [laughs]. And, of course, never did anything else with it.

Which story does Shiner credit as the first appearance of Steampunk?

Utley's and my "Black As The Pit, From Pole to Pole..." The one where we put in Frankenstein, Mary Shelley, the whole bit.

The hollow earth story.

Right. And we just never did anything like that again. I had forgotten. I'm not claiming to have invented Steampunk: Lew thinks I did.

So *I, John Mandeville* is next in the queue?

That's how it seems to me, since I think twenty-three years is long enough to think about a novel before you write it.

What happened to the trout novel?

That's still there, too. It's not an sf or fantasy novel. It's a history of America in its fishing and its third-party politics. It follows a collateral family from the mid-1700s up until – well, it was originally 1993, but is now about 2004.

I don't know how to refer to it: it's not sf or fantasy, but has all that stuff in it, Magic Realism. When it's weird it's weird, and when it's not, it's straightforward. Not too many important events in American history are covered in it, more the small ones.

Will critics describe this book as a cross between *Little, Big* and *Trout Fishing in America*?

I don't know [laughs]. I haven't read *Little Big* – saw the blurb and put it down, saying "Can't read this yet!" The same goes for T. Coraghessan Boyle's *World's End*, which tells of a Dutch family.

It's too close to your own themes?

I don't want to know if it is or not. I'm not afraid to read stuff when I'm doing research; what I'm afraid is, I'll read something that tells me everybody's out there gunning for the same thing; I'm afraid that someone's going to hit something like what I was going to do. If I don't know about it, I can still do it just like I planned.

Do you have a title for this novel?

No, I don't. The original title was *Other Men's Ditches*, which is from the nursery rhyme of, what? Tom Tittlemouse, but that's a stupid title. When I started out originally the emphasis was more on the third-party politics than it is now, but that's still there. All the weird third parties America has had, and a family of people who fish. It's mostly their relatives who are in these third parties, and they've got to deal with it.

Any other novels you want to do?

There are a couple more banging around. Two have turned into novels, which is real nice. They compress themselves down. I used Lew Shiner's method, which is, if you think about them long enough, they get shorter. Except for *I, John Mandeville*, which has always been the size it's going to be.

One is the one I'm doing for Cheap Street. Scared me to death: it came to me on the same day as *The Moon World*. I don't know what the hell was going on that day. Got one in the morning, and the other in the afternoon, and at first thought they were both novels, but that just wouldn't do.

Not if you only finish one every ten years.

Right. So I sat down and thought about them, and one turned into a novella. That's the next thing I'm working on. While I was in England I did a story for Ellen Datlow [of *Omni*]. It's called "The Effects of Alienation"; it's a funny Nazi story, I guess you could say. It's about other stuff, too. It was one I had been thinking about for a couple years.

I did it because I had another story – the fabled Little Moron story I had been threatening to write for fifteen years – that I wrote for Ellen. We knew

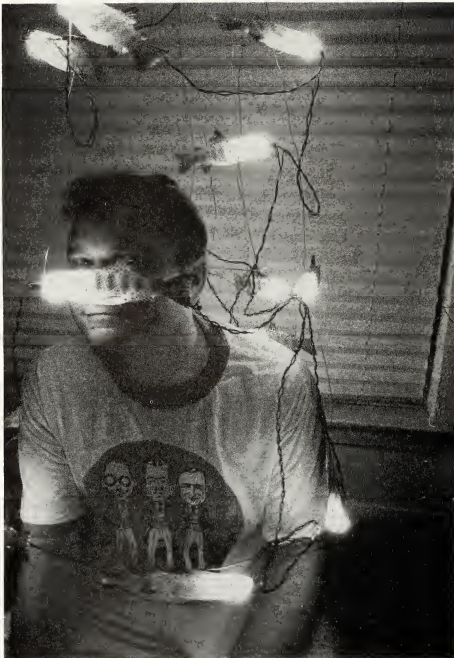


Photo by Martha Gronon

it needed work somewhere. We both read it two or three times, all of my friends read it, and nobody could figure out what was wrong. It'll come to me some afternoon in a blinding flash, but I told her instead of farting with this, I would rather write her a new story. I don't want it preying on my mind, trying to force something to happen in a story.

So the Little Moron story is in draft now?

I thought it was complete. But the more we read it, the less ready it seemed. Something's wrong in the last two pages, and I know it and so does everybody else, but nobody knows what it is. It's something about the structure, something's on the wrong page.

Was this your first trip to England?

It was my first trip out of the United States. A great convention [Mexicon], five days of fun and frolic, really good panels, and I got to meet everybody who had just been names to me for twenty years.

The convention lasted five days?

The way I did it, it did. We got up there Thursday night, didn't leave until Monday afternoon. So now I'm back to the Cheap Street story, which should be done in about a week. It's called "You Could Go Home Again," and it's another Thirties story, with Thomas Wolfe and Fats Waller. It's about a Technocracy Thirties – you know, the guys who were going to take over when everything failed?

Another story I now don't have to write is the Midget Cowboy story. The final working title was "The Search for

Tom Purdue," but I don't have to do that anymore, because of the graphic novel *The Waste Land*. It was the same kind of stuff, the Fisher King myth.

The Fisher King is a graphic novel?

Yeah, it's got Eliot, and a private eye, and a lot of the elements I was going to put into this thing. Mine was about a guy searching for a lost screenplay. Now I don't have to do that.

You said somewhere that the original story in *Night of the Cooters* was going to be something you called the Communist Ghost story.

Right, I am going to write that, it's a novella. It's an alternate-world story, which may be one too many genres. Not the communists most people expect. It's also set in the late 1800s.

I've got another novella, that takes place during World War I, that I want to do. There are five or six I want to do. If you know somebody wants a novella, that makes it a lot easier.

You used to publish collaborations much more often than you now do.

I haven't done a collaboration in about fourteen years. But if everything goes right there will be a collaborative collection in a year or so, of the six or seven good collaborations that I did. It includes an unpublished story with Bruce Sterling, a tenth-century Japanese detective story. You know: "When in doubt, have a man come through the wall with a sword." We wrote that around 1976, in fact before anything of Bruce's had been published. And we looked at it about a year ago, and it's still good. We're gonna fix it up a little bit, but there was nothing wrong with the story, there was just no market for it.

There's another unpublished collaboration with Joe Pumlila, a near-future detective story set in a future that is never going to happen now. They date very quickly, futures. We're going to treat it as a period piece, not try to update anything when we revise.

When Harlan Ellison published *Partners in Wonder*, he expressed regret that he had never collaborated with a woman. Do you have similar regrets?

Yes, I do. It's amazing that Leigh Kennedy and I lived together for five and a half years and we never collaborated. We just never thought about it. One time Lisa Tuttle and I were going to do a collaboration, but it never came about because we both got too busy.

Collaboration is one of the things you do when you're young and have too much time and energy. And don't know any better. You have so much

energy that you have more time than your own work requires. All of us were the same age, and started writing at the same time, and were just bubbling over. And we collaborated like crazy. When you got through with your own work, you turned around and did a collaboration with your friends.

And you began to wonder, because the collaborative stuff nearly always sold immediately, much faster than your own stuff. Of course, one reason was that many of them were short, and there was a market for short-stories.

So you don't see yourself doing that again.

It's that you don't find yourself thinking in collaborative terms any more. But I never say never any more, because life will surprise you. Two of the last people anyone in the world thought would collaborate were Bruce and Bill Gibson, except that early short story. And now there's that whole damn novel.

Your biographical sketch in *Twentieth Century Science-Fiction Writers* lists some exotic occupations, such as five years as an auditory research subject. Have you never been tempted to a university position, or a job in publishing?

No. Those were only part-time jobs I did for the first ten years or so. And all I've done since 1980 is write. I can't make a living at it; I make about half a living. But it takes all my time – lazy as I am, it takes all my time to do three or four stories plus part of a novel per year. And if I had a job, too, it would be even slower. I worked in advertising for six months, and when I was in the Army I was an Information Specialist, which means working on a fort newspaper. The last thing I wanted to do when I got home was write. I made myself do it, but it was sheer drudgery.

The auditory thing was the almost perfect part-time job, and one that everyone who comes to Austin has had at one time or another. You go into a sound-proof room with nine other people, and for forty-five minutes they play you a list of rhyming words with 100 decibel helicopter noise in the background. You write down the words you hear, and they run this through a computer and get a graph on the intelligibility. It was a mindless job, but I lasted longer than anybody there ever had: five years; most people quit after about two months.

So for ten years you have made it as a full-time writer.

Well, I guess you could say "made it." The books are selling in other countries: *Them Bones* is still in print in France, after a trade and a mass

paper edition, and they've published a collection. *Them Bones* is also supposed to have a German edition, an Italian, and I think a Spanish. And in England it has had the hardcover, trade paper, and mass paper editions, which is kind of a coup.

Legend did the first two collections as an omnibus, called *Strange Things in Close-Up*, and now they're doing *Cooters* and *A Dozen Tough Jobs* as one book. (But Ace is doing the second collection and *A Dozen Tough Jobs* together, they didn't like the first collection. So the bibliography is very skewed.)

So I guess the two novels are helping: the book I did with Jake Saunders over fifteen years ago, *The Texas-Israeli War*, 1999, used to be reissued by del Rey every four years like clockwork, although they haven't lately.

But I'm essentially a short story writer – I wish I were a novelist; I wish I could write novels with the same confidence. But they get done, eventually. People tell me that *Them Bones* was done in three sections, but that's how I intended it. I wasn't braiding three short stories together. It had to be a novel, because I knew where everything went.

Will *The Moon World* have a single narrative?

Yes, it will. It starts off very broad scope – scenes set all over the world – then narrows down. We get a big cast of characters at first, then it narrows to about ten. It's going to be 300-350 typed pages. That's a novel.

Do you feel you've reached your audience? Your work is published mostly in genre magazines and anthologies, and more recently in small press editions. Do you wish you were published in a different form – in the *New Yorker*, or by Knopf or Jonathan Cape?

No, I don't wish all that stuff. I'm surprised that as many people want to look for my stuff as there are. If someone really wants to find it, they can get it.

Of course, when you try to explain to most people what you do, they immediately think it's rockets and dinosaurs, but the genre is big and wide enough to support that and what I do, too. I'm perfectly happy being published the way I am; I would be totally happy to keep doing this, because if something good can come out of it, it can happen here too.

Nobody messes with me really much. When they do, it's usually for a good reason. Nobody's tried to mould me, shape me. That's not what you get in a lot of places.

No, I'm fine right where I am. I'm doing what I want to do, and not everybody can say that. I'm not making a living at it, but I'm doing it. ●

The Analogical Imago

Ian Lee

You would never have guessed to look at me that I had existential depths. You would've said I was a deadhead aimless drifter moron. You would've said I was ideal fodder for any sort of social engineering welfare society safety net dropout development scheme fund project that anyone cared to throw at me. You would've doubted my capacity for lifestyle, for choices, for gumption, for independent will, effort, decision-making or even self-control. You would've said I could be most useful to society by allowing myself to be used.

Perhaps something of this opprobrious image percolated through the carapace of my outwardly defiantly insouciant persona, puncturing, as it were, the balloon. Perhaps that was why I let myself in for it the way I did – and how! as they used to say. Not only that but I suppose I had a rather grubby mien, so perhaps that's what gave them the idea to treat me the way they did. But all that's image: only on the outside. Inside is where the real lifestyle is and there I'm really catalytic, you know: a converter.

Really, I just lied my way aimlessly into the project and they gave me the position because I was the best at it; at lying, that is – laying down the bullshit. And I mean with a trowel. In large dollops. I said I had several degrees and years of experience in all sorts of entomological research. I kidded myself I was impressing the boots off them, the selectors, the laboratoricians, my keepers, the scientists, what should I call them? Arthur, Hughie, Damian and Deirdre – what a team! They said they were into agrico-horticultural research projects by the busload, that being where the grants were raining down this season. But really they just wanted a plant that would climb: they wanted a sucker.

How would you like to do something for the benefit of the planet, they said. Something that's a bit of a stunt, really, but at the same time it could be interesting. It's for a good cause, you can't deny it. You'll be on prime time (they didn't say which channel – just like me to be swivelled by the magic phrases but forget to get the legal angles measured before I went for the fit up). They said I'd be OK. They said I'd have my own room and bed and three meals a day – a real homefromhome – and free passes for the moviedrome and the leisuredome and the pleasurezone. They said it was all painless and they said it would be a simple matter to return me to

normal size and shape afterwards. They said it had been done before and the only reason I hadn't heard about it was because there was a military patent embargo on the idea. I believed that of course because I'm as pathologically pathologically paranoid as anyone, though I'd be grateful if you kept that to yourself.

You got it yet? What's my line? Nah? Thing is, the term "guinea pig" has a quaintly oldy worldly aroma that will barely do the right meaning thing in the head to someone from the outside. But it has its validity, I suppose. For one thing, it suggests payment – guineas, old time sheks, snouts in the trough – which is very much to the point and very necessary to the lifestyle and all variants (forgive the pun). For another thing, it is, after all, the ancestral role model. For what I do.

Genetic manipulation is one thing, my old mother used to say, but once you let those people get in amongst your sub-molecular particles, your life won't be your own. Sign up for the Royal Corps of Simulators (Simcorp for short)? Me? You must be joking! But I did. Seven years on the dossing underclass long-term unemployable sun-bed scrapheap with drip feed handouts from the Leisure Minders, a welfare pie on Saturdays and muscle treatments on Wednesdays was enough for me. Unemployment? You can keep it, I decided that this was the lifestyle, never knowing from one day to the next what my new form and function would be. A drifter's paradise.

So the first crucial idea once I was on the strength was to make me into a simulacrum of a grub – cabbage white caterpillar to be precise. They told me something similar had been done before by a Czech called Kafka; with a beetle actually. They said it was like how large computers could emulate small ones, behave like them. They said they could do that with me and I believed them. Looking back now, I can see the nudges in the ribs and hear the suppressed chuckles and I'm pretty well bloody convinced it was all intended as a wind up. Funny thing is, I still feel as though I want to join in the joke, make it go well.

They thought they could leave me as the grub emulation for a day or two, take the photos, make the readings, all that stuff, and then bring me back, have a party and go on to the next thing. They're completely irresponsible. I tell them they shouldn't play at being God. They say, who? and then roar with laughter as they stick another needle in the nearest docile lifeform. Fact is, they'll do anything, say anything to me because I'm just the sim. I sighed my body away

when I came in here and without that they're not interested in the mind. I have thoughts still, too many thoughts, but they're not all connected with the bod, because the bod is not always connected in the same way. They keep the consciousness going but at one remove from direct perception, like in a judge or a railway booking office clerk. I seem to be able to use the perceptual organs of the life-form I'm emulating, but in a superior sort of way. Let me think of a better analogy... It's like being a computer operating system: I'm the consciousness that organizes the applications and I can be transferred identically from one machine to another. Don't worry about this too much – you only have to follow the explanations intuitively.

Too many thoughts can be bad for the health in my job. I'm supposed to blow with the wind, which is why I get obsessed with choices and will and lifestyle and how I got here and where I'm going. I knew how I'd got there but I didn't have the faintest idea where I was going. They keep the future plans well and truly locked up away from my prying eyes. How could I be used in an experiment and how could that experiment be published to support some prize-winning new hypothesis if people found out that the sm knew what the experiment was about? They'd say I interfered, selected the answers I'd been programmed to select.

So the whole thing is based on reformatting matter – my matter. What happens is this, analogically speaking. It's like splitting the atom, where they have to accelerate the particles to great speed. Or put it another way, it's like putting a pound of apples in a blender and spinning them till you get apple purée. Only in this case you've spun the apples so far they've gone beyond the purée state and beyond even the component fructose and fibres state and are into the molecular and sub-molecular and sub-atomic state. And when you've got your apples in that sort of condition – flexible pure energy (FPE) they call it – well then you can use them to make rhubarb crumble or a new Toyota. Matters not whether rhubarb is in season. Think of it as re-incarnation if that's easier for you, culturally.

So anyway, back to the bug thing. Most of me was waiting in the corner of the lab in a big cylindrical pod like an automatic street super-loo or the Orgasmatron in Sleeper. My matter was held in suspension – a sort of FPE soup – and only that part which was needed for the simulation – in this case a very small amount – was extruded into the biorame, which is a bit like a plant propagator to look at but as large as a room and costs about 850,000 times as much. The point was they thought they could simulate the caterpillar, let it jive for a day or two on some cabbage and then recon it – me, that is. I was supposed to report on the relative attractiveness of different varieties or some such nonsense. Trouble was, it got to Friday and it was Hughie's birthday and they all went down the pub and when they came back they were in no condition. Next thing any of them knew it was home time and then the place was deserted. They left the biozone lamps blasting away, of course and before I knew what was happening, I'd gone into pupating overdrive. Jesus H. Chrystalis on a bicycle.

Come Monday, dawn, a new week, new challenges and I'd transmogrified completely of course into the

sweetest little cabbage white butterfly you ever saw.

Damian said it wasn't his fault; he had constructed the caterpillar totally in accordance with the specification. Deirdre said she couldn't be blamed; the cabbages were as ordered. Hughie denied responsibility, pointing out that the environmental control parameters remained unbreached. That just left Arthur. He, after all was in charge; he had designed the experiment and what's more, he had gone away on leave. Clearly it was his fault.

Someone said, let's ring Arthur. Someone else said, we can't. Why not? Because he's gone on a cycling holiday in the Rockies. He's away for three weeks. Deirdre, Hughie, Damian and I looked at each other with but a single thought. (I don't think they knew I was looking at them – my tiny clubbed antennae are singularly inexpressive – but I'm pretty sure they knew what I was thinking.) Damian said he would check; and tapped a few keys on his terminal. About ten days, he said, give or take: sorry.

I think the apology was for my benefit.

The thing was that the system was not set up to deal with structure changes occurring outside its own boundaries. Let me think of an analogy. I can't. Well, sort of: it was like going out of a disco without getting one of the big genial bouncers in a Motorhead t-shirt to stamp the back of your hand with the hip groovy farout club logo that would only show up under ultraviolet light. In other words, there was no going back. The system had used part of my matter to create the caterpillar. It had the co-ordinates of the caterpillar as created and then could have reversed the polarities, as we say, and turned that caterpillar back into the part of me that it had been. They would've put the blender in reverse, as it were, and hey presto: a pound of apples. But the caterpillar co-ordinates unfortunately had ceased to exist.

Can we, uh, compute the algorithm for transferring the butterfly back to grub status, said Damian, using that style and that irritating short-vowel American pronunciation that he had learned from listening in to deadpan laidback techno-superior mission control desk-jockeys on the planetshot broadcasts on cable TV. Deirdre looked at Hughie for inspiration, was disappointed and shook her head. Does not compute, she said, rather mechanically. I was not convinced that this was an appropriate time to be indulging in the more macabre reaches of dry humour. Damian said, Shucks, and sneaked a glance at where the rest of me was still gurgling away in the Orgasmatron public convenience blender. What scale were we on? he said. Twenty, said Deirdre. So how much of him would be missing if we just scrubbed the butterfly? About 0.1% I guess. Would that matter?

To whom? And which 0.1% are we talking about here?

Well, we don't have butterfly co-ordinates, and we can't relate the ex-caterpillar to what we've got, so we don't have much choice, said Deirdre. Such a practical girl, Deirdre; close-cropped blonde hair, black leggings, a tendency to underdramatize her observations but conscientious and logical to a fault.

Free will, where are you now? This is 0.1% of me they're talking about, for all I know the most important 0.1%, and all they can say is, we don't really have a choice. What they mean is that I don't really have

a choice. What really worries me is that when they try to reconstitute me without the 0.1% the system will fail altogether because it won't know which 0.1% to leave out. It's programmed to recon the whole body from a given amount of matter. Let me think of an analogy. It's like trying to get money out of the bank with a stripe card when you've got one digit of the PIN wrong. Every other element of the million instruction transaction is present, from the reading of the card's magnetic inscription to the handshakes between the hole in the wall and the base camp megacomputer but the one false digit means an infinite wait for your money. Lockout, no dice, nul points. In this case, it won't let the body reconstitute from the sub-mol soup in the blender and the butterfly.

Nine days later.

I was right about the recon failure. The consciousness in the cabbage white is beginning to get a little long in the tooth. The guys have moved on to worrying about other things, if worrying is the right word. Deirdre has been playing old Beatles records. I may be wrong, or perhaps I'm being oversensitive, but that seems rather tasteless.

Arthur phoned in unexpectedly from Denver, Colorado, yesterday and Deirdre spent the first \$50 of his phone call making stupid jokes about beetles. I think she was too embarrassed to tell him what had happened. Eventually she did, nevertheless, and I could hear one of those long transatlantic silences down the phone. After a while Deirdre said, Hello, are you still there? And he obviously was, because she hung on. Then she said she'd have to go and get a pencil and paper and she spent about another \$25 rummaging around in her Peruvian shoulder bag before she found a suitable tablet and implement. Then there was a long period with Deirdre taking dictation, occasionally saying things like "Do you mean glucose or fructose?" and "Does it matter what sort of Toyota?" but all the while looking very intense and scribbling away like mad on the pieces of paper she had found. In the end the table by the phone looked rather like a trestle table after a by-election.

I was all antennae for what came next. Deirdre summoned Damian and Hughie and told them that Arthur had called. She repeated one or two of the beetle jokes but relented over the third when Hughie started drumming his fingers pointedly on the lab bench. Yes, she admitted, she had told Arthur about the Experiment That Went Horribly Wrong; yes, he had been cross and yes, he had had an idea about how to put it right. It was so gloriously simple she couldn't think why it hadn't occurred to them before. After all, they had had nearly ten days to think about it and they were all PhDs (nearly, anyway, in Hughie's case) and they had conducted extensive computer searches through the relevant literature. Wasn't it strange that Arthur, several thousand miles away, with no books to hand and with the problem only just explained to him (and barely coherently, in my opinion)... Hughie and Damian started moving threateningly towards the blonde babbler and she broke off in alarm. OK, OK, she said, the answer is this: use another caterpillar.

I couldn't believe my antennae. I thought, am I detecting things, or what? They're going to let Me in the Butterfly die and hope that a substitute caterpillar

will recon into the Blender Me with no ill effects? Will this work? Let me think of an analogy. It's like using a baboon heart in a human mercy dash baby drama transplant op. Did that used to work? I couldn't remember. Only at the level we are talking about here, the caterpillar will be distributed throughout the new me so I won't be able to tell. Deirdre was telling the others what Arthur had told her: that at the FPE level it didn't really matter much whether it was the original caterpillar or not; there weren't really any personal characteristics in play down there, so really any matter that could be presented to the system in the exact form — with the right structural co-ordinates — of the caterpillar it was looking for would do.

The lab was cold the next morning. Or was it me that was cold? I was getting a bit sluggish, trying not to depress myself with thoughts of impending demise. It's not easy being a butterfly without a future. I tried to cheer myself up by imagining that I was turning back into a caterpillar. The first butterfly in history to make the return journey from beyond the pupa. I could be famous, I could write books, appear on chat shows, go lecturing: I could clean up. The trouble was, I wasn't really sure where my consciousness was at this point. I had sort of identified with the butterfly because I couldn't really identify with the soup in the blender. Soup is so... so passive. I seemed somehow to retain awareness of what was going on around me through the butterfly sensors but at the same time I didn't really believe I was going to go lights out when my little delicate white fluttering short-lived cabbage-loving host snuffed it.

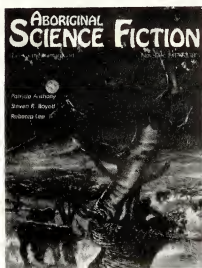
The last thing I remember from the point of view of the butterfly was Damian bringing a matchbox over to the biorame and opening it close by. There was something creepy crawly inside; and I should know. The fog was closing in by this time and things were getting rather dull and slow. It was hard work just staying on the leaf. I think I sent out a message of good luck to the hapless caterpillar on one of the insect frequency CB goodbuddy communication nets before they turned the system on. Then everything went very very dark or very very bright; it was really difficult to tell which. When I woke up I was back in the dormitory as though nothing had happened.

I'm still waiting to see whether there have been any lasting side effects. I find it harder to laugh and joke with the team now than I did; I tend to feel a cold shiver up my spine when they approach. (It's where my caterpillar heart was.) And I have the odd nightmare where I grow a hard outer layer of skin, and then degrade gracefully inside into a sort of overcooked rhubarb and custard fluid before emerging again as a giant butterfly which flutters momentarily then gets splattered in the radiator grille of an unrealistically large Japanese car. On the other hand, I have begun to feel a deep affinity with many other life-forms at a sub-molecular level and have started going to the meditation classes at the local Buddhist centre. I have decided to stop being a Simulator and go back to being a real person. As I say, it's a question of lifestyle; and catalysis; and conversion.

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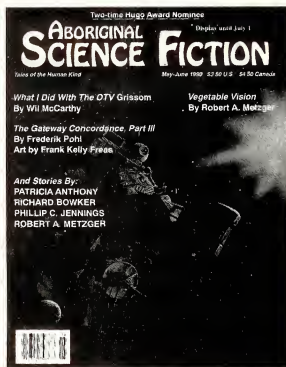


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A Dream of Sussex

Matthew Dickens

"I don't know, you give your fucking life to try to build something, and all the time you got some fuckhead like this tearin' it all down. Look, there's a picture of Luke Draeger, remember him?" None of them did. "I seen him walk on the moon, hoys, I helped put him there. Or was it Mars? Anyway, NASA still means something to some of us. It means – it means – hillingow exhaust clouds catching the first light of dawn; a silver needle rising, reaching for the fucking stars! The puny critter we call Man leaping out to conquer the sky, to rendezvous with his Eternal Destiny! Call me a dreamer, boys, but I see Man leaping out from this little planet of ours, to the Moon, to the planets, to our neighbouring stars and finally beyond, to the infinite reaches of dark promise beyond – into the cocksucking Unknown!"

(John Sladek, Roderick, chap.1)

"**T**he cocksucking Unknown..." Is this where science fiction is headed? David Pringle (Interface, IZ 49) seems to think that it is. He's not the only one. Colin Greenland is cited as positing a return among new British writers to generic space opera, and Roz Kaveney in an article in the programme booklet to Mexican 4 concurs. Writers are selling up their properties in rural Dorset and blasting off into space. Wessex has become a Deserted Village.

But was Wessex really as downbeat and introspective as these commentators would have it? The simple answer is: No! The "Wessex school," so mercilessly disparaged by DP in his editorial, was in reality far more upbeat and life-affirming than may at first glance appear.

Take J.G. Ballard (although I doubt he was a writer Pringle really intended to disparage with the "Wessex" label). In an introduction to his celebrated novelette "The Voices of Time" (which, it is worth noting, he himself identifies as the piece most representative of the whole body of his work), Ballard says that the story expresses "the determination to break out of a deepening psychological entropy and make some kind of private peace with the unseen powers of the universe."

Or take John Brunner. His Hugo-winning *Stand on Zanzibar* tells a sober tale of runaway overpopulation and global collapse. Yet in the closing

lines of this bulky work, the sociologist hero, Chad C. Mulligan, who has spent the entire preceding action making caustic remarks about human stupidity, corruption, etc., breaks down, sobbing, "I know you're fools – I've watched you and wept for you. And... Oh my God! I love you! I've tried not to and I can't help it. I love you all..." and has to be led off by a couple of friends (presumably to wherever it is crazed lovers of humanity are taken).

Are these really the reactions of pessimistic writers, of writers who believe that the future holds nothing but apocalypse and despair? No; rather they display a deep-rooted core of faith in the fundamental capacity of humanity to emerge from even the grimmest situation intact, an unshakeable conviction that when the chips are down, human beings will win through.

Christopher Priest (from whose novel *A Dream of Wessex* the Wessex school presumably takes its name) was once accused by a reviewer of taking the train into the wrong tunnel; in other words, he wrote an sf novel set in the past. "Is this the direction sf should be going?" protested the reviewer.

What Priest did in this novel (*The Space Machine*), fairly obviously, and what the steampunk authors of the last decade did in theirs, was to take sf in a new direction. The past, or alternative versions of it, have often been almost as much a staple of science fiction as the future – a phenomenon which DP himself makes some acknowledgement of in his editorial for IZ 46. The Wessex school's concern with the past is thus not necessarily backward-looking except in a superficial sense; these writers understood that the past could provide an indirect route to the future, a means of approaching their subject not ass-backwards, as the editor of this magazine implied, but by a circuitous, often tortuous path. Gregory Benford, a noted Wessex-hater, did just this in his *Nebula*-winning *Timescape*.

Some Wessex sf has been rightly criticized for being too "domestic" in flavour, of portraying cosy catastrophe, full of middle-class folk struggling desperately to come to terms with a

world that has suddenly become alien, hostile. However, the best Wessex sf demonstrates by its very choice of familiar rural or suburban milieus that the future must and will impinge even upon these ghettos, despite their often wilful resistance to change.

But enough of this brief defence of Wessex science fiction. The genre has indeed moved on from this style of writing. Some of the best writers of the 60's and early 70's happened to be writing within Wessex; now, in the 90's, the focus has shifted dramatically, back into outer space.

It's ironic, and perhaps no coincidence, that this rediscovery of space has happened more or less contemporaneously with the severe depression of the NASA space programme. Since the Challenger disaster, and the post-Reagan decline of SDI, Congress has decided that The Stars are Too High; or at any rate, the cost of reaching them is. NASA's budget has been cut, and with it, unfortunately, the prospects for tapping the vast wealth of knowledge and resources floating around in space. With the end of the Cold War, the Space Race has long since petered out. So for want of real action, sf writers are having to make do with imaginary journeys to the stars.

Enter this putative new school of writers – Generats, etc; or – to add one more name to the plethora of irritating labels with which sf abounds – the Sussex school. Yes, British sf has moved to (what used to be) the booming south-east, to Sussex, skiffy capital of Western Europe, with more sf editors per head of the population than anywhere else in the galaxy. But these writers are different; they're not just interested in the giant artefacts and cosmic backdrops of space opera – though they have all these – but in the smaller scale, the human side of things, an aspect that is generally fairly thin on the ground in some of the earlier examples of the subgenre, especially in those godawful tales of space cadets proving their maturity by wiping out aliens and other communists. The Sussex school magically combine the sensawunda of the Golden Age with the polished prose and three-

dimensional characters of Wessex, to produce stories that contain the best of both worlds.

Paul McAuley, Eric Brown and Stephen Baxter – three classic examples of the Sussex school. Stories like "Exiles," "The Girl Who Died For Art and Lived," "Vacuum Diagrams," and others, have that distinctive bitter-sweet aftertaste of Wessex, perhaps best captured in Eric Brown's most praised story, "The Time-Lapsed Man," whose protagonist, in true Ballardian style, is absorbed into the nada continuum, making his private peace with the unseen powers of the universe.

David Pringle is keen to emphasize this new outward-looking spirit in British sf, hoping to dispel the myth that Brits can write only introspective, downbeat stories. We can only hope that sceptics like Greg Benford and David Wingrove will take note. But at the same time let's not poo-poo the old Wessex school, nor dismiss it as unrelievedly gloomy and retrogressive; Sussex has at least some of its roots in Wessex, and the debt that today's writers always owe to those of yesterday should not be discounted simply because the latter have gone out of fashion. Both schools, as science-fiction movements, must when all's

said and done, share that fascination with what sf's all about: the cocksuck-ing Unknown.

Dream on, Sussex.

(Matthew Dickens)

David Pringle responds: indeed, it was never my intention to include the work of J.G. Ballard, or, for that matter, of John Brunner in the so-called Wessex School of sf. Far from it. What I had in mind was a certain type of "soft" British science fiction which could be said to have started in the 60s with books such as Brian Aldiss's *Greybeard* and Keith Roberts's *Pavane* (fine works, both) but which really came to full flower in the 70s and early 80s – you know, anything with Celts or Anglo-Saxons in; anything set in westerly parts of England; anything involving time travel or grand cycles of time in which the future becomes the past; anything which features hill-forts, barrows, dolmens or Stonehenge... Ballard's work, such as *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* are a million miles removed from all that. (See also this issue's letters column for further comments on the "Wessex" controversy.)

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World SF Conference in China

Brian Stableford

The international organization of sf professionals, World SF, has now spent more than ten years building bridges between the sf communities of different nations. It is a conscientiously non-political organization which has always tried hard to promote communication and understanding between East and West, and the invitation to hold the 1991 World SF meeting in Chengdu, the capital of China's Sichuan Province, was therefore especially welcome.

Foreign representation at the conference was unfortunately, if understandably, sparse, but it included such notable writers as Brian Aldiss, Frederik Pohl, Jack Williamson, Suzy McKee Charnas, and the indefatigable editor of *Locus*, Charles N. Brown. Despite an unexpected disruption of the programme when the conference members were trapped by landslides in Wolong (a mountain village close to the Giant Panda Research Station) for an unscheduled second night, the conference was a great success and an unforgettablely fascinating experience. The current president of World SF, Malcolm Edwards, discharged his duties magnificently, hitting exactly the right note in the many speeches which protocol required him to deliver.

Chinese science fiction has had a rocky historical ride. When Chinese writers first began producing sf the principal models available were the works of Jules Verne, many of which had been translated in the early part of the century. Most of H.G. Wells' works became available in the following decades, and in the 1950s a good deal of Russian sf appeared in translation, including works by Alexei Tolstoy, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, Ivan Yefremov, and Alexander Belayev, but modern Western sf was virtually unknown. After a relative brief period of activity, Chinese sf was completely suppressed during the cultural revolution, and its recovery after 1979 – when translations of American sf first began to appear in some profusion – soon began to peter out after reaching a peak in 1981. Signs of revival this year were largely attributable to the inspiration of the impending conference, and it is

to be hoped that the publicity surrounding the meeting may help to preserve the impetus of this revival.

The misfortunate history of Chinese sf was evident in the first paper presented to the conference by a Chinese writer – the most prestigious figure in Chinese sf, Zheng Wenguang. Despite being unable to walk unaided, and virtually unable to speak, Mr Zheng had made the arduous journey to Chengdu to hear his paper read by an interpreter. He began writing juvenile sf in 1954, and was very successful, but his works were condemned during the cultural revolution and he was sent to work on a collective farm as a peasant. Although his health suffered during this period, he returned to writing as soon as he was able, more prolifically and more diversely than before.

Like Zheng Wenguang, other Chinese sf writers tend to write primarily for younger readers. Guo Jianzhong, who heads a research centre for science fiction at Hangzhou University, explained in his paper that while China has a significant number of scientists who can write hard sf, it does not yet have a large adult population sufficiently well-educated in science to appreciate such works. For this reason, science fiction in China is in a phase when it is inevitably regarded primarily as a means of popularizing science for the young, and must await the growth of an audience capable of appreciating it before it can begin to be more sophisticated. Mr Guo went on to point out, however, that given the magnitude of the Chinese population the potential audience is enormous, and needs only time and some careful educative groundwork to bring it to the point of emergence.

Many of the Chinese writers were, as might be expected, full of propagandist fervour for sf. Zi Minyun's paper "Why are Science Fictions Needed?" put forward a Gernsbackian case, arguing for the inspirational and educational value of sf, and Shao Hua's discourse on "Science Fiction – Flourishing or Bleak?" argued strongly for the popularization of a view of the future which could accommodate many possible alternatives. (Such a plea is, of course, rather

more radical in the Chinese context than it would be in the West because – as Guo Jianzhong took care to point out – Chinese culture has long put a high value on stability and resistance to change.) There was, however, some controversy regarding the best way forward. Liu Xingshi argued very forcefully that what is needed in Chinese sf is a very high standard of realism, dealing with practical technological projects, and that the prospect of an inundating influx of foreign sf and fantasy (which he represented as "flying from real life") is not to be welcomed.

In this context, the role played by the one surviving Chinese sf magazine, *SF World*, will undoubtedly be a vital one. In Britain and America magazines serve the important but subsidiary function of nurturing new writers, but in China SF World must take on the much heavier responsibility of providing an anchorage for the genre, helping to preserve, extend and educate a community of readers which will grow more sophisticated as time goes by, much as John W. Campbell's *Astounding SF* did in America. Fortunately, the editor of *SF World*, Yang Xiao – who was also the organizer of the conference – is a woman of seemingly infinite energy and determination, whose resourcefulness will surely prove equal to the task before her.

For myself, I was both delighted and proud to be able to take part in the conference, and to put before the audience a few of my own ideas about the significance of science fiction. Had the occasion been no more than an opportunity for a number of enthusiasts to meet and share ideas it would have been interesting and worthwhile, but the organizers clearly thought that it was far more important than that, and that the fact of the conference taking place in Chengdu might make a material difference to the status and future prospects of sf in China. I hope that they are right.

The End of the World

Don Webb

To find Louis Fegelmeyer at the centre of the world – at the Omphalos – is somewhat surprising. The centre of the world moves constantly – that's why the world moves constantly. If you had the perspective of a god, you would see it as a beam of light. Occasionally someone intersects the beam and their actions set off the ripples called history. Some adepts of this or that mystical school may recognize the light when it strikes them. They spend their whole lives waiting for the beam, and if they're lucky (they call it karma) the beam, the Axis Mundi, passes through them. They know they have to act quickly for the beam may only touch them for a few seconds. At the best it may hang around for a week or so. James Watt was near the beam when he invented the steam engine. Steam engine. Steam engine. Steam engine. And the world was transformed from an agrarian society to an industrial one in one hundred and fifty years. Nice going James. Hero of Alexandria also invented the steam engine, but the beam was somewhere in India at the time. Hero's engine was a toy that amused the public two, three days tops.

Louis Fegelmeyer, who hadn't had any sort of mystical training, stood five feet four inches tall; had brown hair, light brown (almost yellow) eyes; wore a brown corduroy ("wears like iron") coat, and on occasions when he felt exceptionally daring, sported a red tie. He managed the accounts at Dependable Appliances with the aid of his trust IBMclone.

There had been hints that the world beam was approaching Dependable Appliances. On Monday Louis' hair had stood up while shaving – during this electric frisson he had cut himself with his razor. He'd stopped at the pharmacy to buy bandages, but all the bandages were gone. "There's been a rush on them," said the clerk, whose own chin was bandaged. Louis got to work fifteen minutes late, but that was okay because the boss Ralph Schmenge was late too. So were the customers. On Tuesday Louis lost his contacts and his wife Sarah-Anne had to drive him to work (before going to her own job managing the Daisy Smiles Laundromat). The House of Representatives passed HR 0135, a bill of some 2,374 pages ostensibly a Highways Beautification Act, but containing a clause on page 1066 giving unlimited powers to Jason Sykes, a Congressional page who had slipped the clause in as a joke. Such revolutions and near coups are often snuck into bills and promptly ferreted out by devoted staffs who read every page, every sentence,

every word of the damned things. But a case of collective eye fatigue had hit a thousand staffers, the most dedicated of whom read only to page 825. That evening Jason visited Potomac Pawn and spent his life savings on a 14-carat gold crown which had formerly belonged to Emperor Norton. On Wednesday Louis found his contacts in his medicine chest. The Senate examined HR 0135 and after a short deliberation sent their Master of Arms S.T. Nakt to kill Jason Sykes for High Treason. These things never make the papers. On Thursday the beam was only metres from Louis' desk. Ms Vye Bailey, salesperson and health food faddist, brought carob brownies for everyone. Louis picked up one – thinking it chocolate – swallowed and began choking. Twenty-three auto fatalities occurred within seconds. "I don't know what happened, officer. This guy was driving normally and then he was grabbing at his throat. He went right into that pylon and that's all she wrote."

On Friday Louis enjoyed a pleasant breakfast of reconstituted orange juice, poached eggs, and whole wheat toast. His lawn gleamed with dew and his neighbourhood with smiles. Louis felt that the whole world was fresh and happy (which, of course, it was). He whistled on his way to work and that high-spirited dissonance echoed in the disappearing forests of Amazonia and the cold deserts of Mongolia...

Pleasantville.

He booted his system and a hitherto unseen message appeared on the screen. Drive C FULL. Now Louis had vaguely supposed that files went somewhere – a misty foggy land beyond the screen the same neutral grey of the background – but he never felt it was something that could fill up. He started pulling up file after file to see if there was anything he could delete – Louis as some of you have realized was not terribly computer literate – but each account held some fascination for him. All those marvellous details. Mrs Knockworster, who had left a basket full of kittens and a cheque for the balance of her account at their doorstep (thereby hoping to discharge two obligations at once). Mr T.O. Mann, who had paid for his refrigerator with Spanish gold of an ancient date. Miss Belinda Johnson, who had come to the store after hours and persuaded him to accept sex in lieu of a monthly. Was she enjoying her five-function microwave as much as he the memory of her orange lipstick

staining his body? All of this data, he felt like a god – everything had grown from his first entry – from one word.

Louis didn't know it, but this oceanic feeling came from the world beam, which had just struck him.

Desperate, he pulled the manual out from under the telephone, shook off the dust, and consulted. He found a nice little utility called Compress. Louis smiled. He seldom found solutions to life's problems this easily. He ran the utility feeding it file after file. The utility looked for similarities and reduced them to singularities. Huge files could be squeezed to near nothing.

And the ripples...

The Pentagon, one of the nation's most redundant structures, suddenly collapsed into a one-room pentahoidal shack with a bored PFC pushing one of three buttons, Buy, Lie, Kill. Every red Corvette merged into a single red Corvette. Most of the drivers merged too, but some found themselves standing on the freeway watching other cars vanish like popping soap bubbles. Louis' tract house neighbourhood contracted into three model homes, each representing one of the available models, and these too collapsed into one. Sarah-Anne watched all her washers become one washer, but that seemed OK – she only had one customer anyway. When her laundromat began to move through space to be stored with all the other laundromats, she was only slightly dizzy.

Louis worked all day – unaware that the entire front of the shop had vanished. He had reduced the data to half size and if he really worked it he could halve it again. Equestrian statues galloped into one another, newspapers rustled into a single sheet, sitcoms resolved into a single *I Love Lucy* episode. Soup became condensed soup became one can, which included many of Andy Warhol's paintings.

When quitting time came, Louis stepped out of the beam. Everything looked fuzzy. Maybe he'd lost his contacts. He drove his generic featureless car, which seemed filled with millions of tiny invisible features, which made his hair itch. His house had become a child's painting. Door in the centre, window on each side, smoke out of the chimney. Maybe Sarah-Anne had redone the place. He'd never been very good at noticing things away from work. He went in, kissed the blurry shape that was his wife and millions of other wives, sat down to a generic dinner, watched *I Love Lucy* four times, and went to bed where he dreamed the fate of the world. The compaction continued. Stone into stone, life into life, water into water until stone, water, and life had disappeared. Earth and all its glory sank to a single green phosphor on God's TV screen. Then that too vanished. And in the long run, in the very long run, it didn't matter at all.

Don Webb is a superstar of the American science-fiction small press, now contributing with greater frequency to the fully professional magazines. His previous stories in *Interzone* include "Djinn" (issue 41) and "Reach Out" (issue 49). He lives in Austin, Texas – one of those towns (like our own Reading, Berks.) which seems to be a hive of sf activity.

DEAN R KOONTZ



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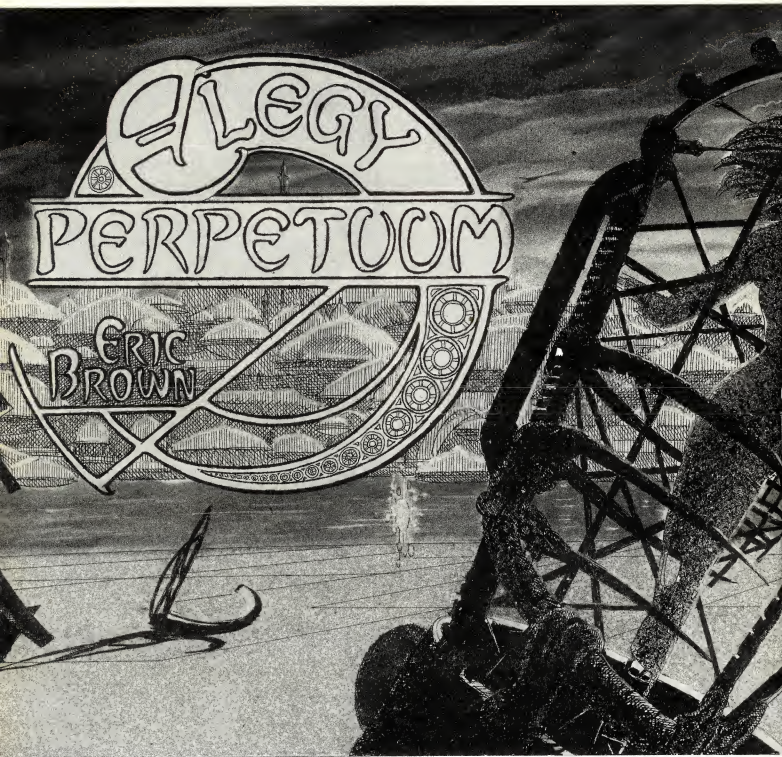
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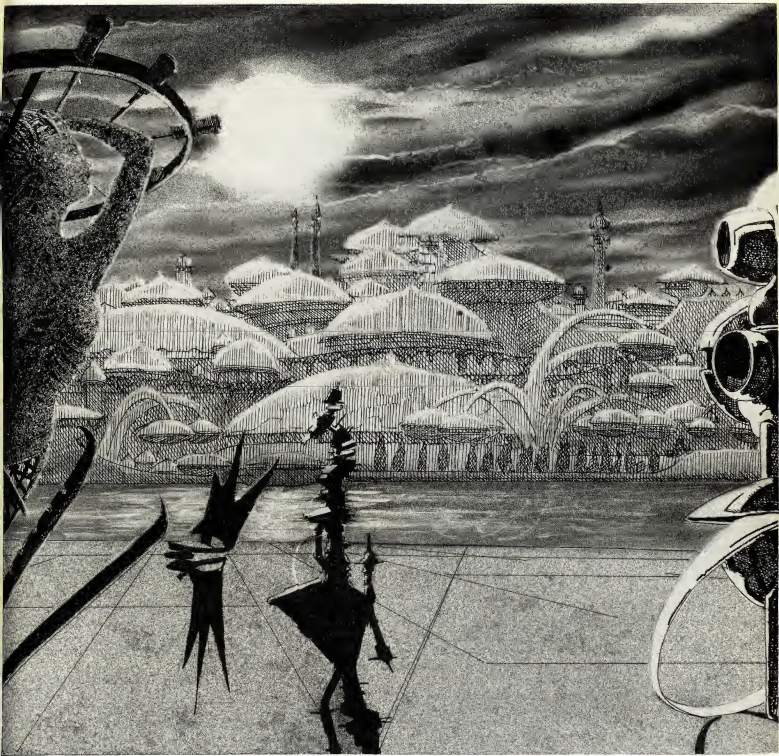


It began one warm evening on the cantilevered, clover-leaf patio of the Oasis Bar. Below us the artists' domes, hanging from great arching scimitar supports, glowed with the pale lustre of opals in the quick Saharan twilight. The oasis itself caught the sunset and turned it into a million coruscating scales, like silver lamé made liquid.

There were perhaps a dozen of us seated around the circular onyx table – fellow artists, agents and critics, enjoying wine and pleasant conversation. Beneath the polite chatter, however, there was the

tacit understanding that this was the overture to the inevitable clash of opinions, not to say egos, of the two most distinguished artists present.

This was my first stay at Sapphire Oasis, and I was still somewhat out of my depth. I feared being seen as an artist of little originality, who had gained admittance to the exclusive colony through the patronage of the celebrated Primitivist Ralph Standish. I did not want to be known as an imitator – though admittedly my early work did show his influence – a novice riding on the coat-tails of genius.



I sat next to the white-haired, leonine figure of Stan-dish, one of the last of the old romantics. As if to dis-sociate himself totally from the Modernists, he affected the aspect of a Bohemian artist of old. He wore a shirt splashed with oils, though he rarely worked in that medium, and the beret by which he was known.

Seated across from him was Perry Bartholomew.

The Modernist – he struck me more as a business-man than an artist – was suave in an impeccably cut grey suit. He lounged in his seat and twirled the stem of his wine glass. He seemed always to wear an expres-

sion of rather superior amusement, as if he found everything that everyone said fallacious but not worth his effort to correct.

I had lost interest in the conversation – two critics were airing their views on the forthcoming contest. I turned my attention to the spectacular oval, perhaps a kilometre in length, formed by the illuminated domes. I was wondering whether I might slip away unnoticed, before Ralph and Bartholomew began their sniping, when for the first time that night the latter spoke up.

He cleared his throat, and this seemed to be taken by all present as a signal for silence. "In my experience," Bartholomew said, "contests and competitions to ascertain the merit of works of art can never be successful. Great art cannot be judged by consensus. Are you submitting anything, Standish?"

Ralph looked up, surprised that Bartholomew was addressing him. He suppressed a belch and stared into his tumbler of whisky. "I can't. I'm ineligible. I'm on the contest's organizing committee."

"Ah..." Bartholomew said. "So you are responsible?" His eyes twinkled.

Ralph appeared irritated. "The Sapphire Oasis Summer Contest is a long-standing event, Perry. I see nothing wrong in friendly competition. The publicity will help everyone. Anyway, if you're so against the idea, why have you submitted a piece?"

The crowd around the table, swelled now by a party that had drifted up from the lawns below, watched the two men with the hushed anticipation of spectators at a duel.

"Why not?" Bartholomew asked. "Although I disagree in principle to the idea of the contest, I see no reason why I should not benefit by winning it."

Ralph laughed. "Your optimism amazes me, sir." Bartholomew inclined his head in gracious acknowledgment.

The resident physician, a man called Roberts, asked the artist if he would be willing to discuss his latest creation.

"By all means," Bartholomew said. "It is perhaps my finest accomplishment, and has also the distinction of being totally original in form." Just when he was becoming interesting, if pompous, he damned himself by continuing, "It should make me millions – which might just satisfy the demands of my wife."

There was a round of polite laughter.

Ralph exchanged a glance with me and shook his head, despairing.

Perry Bartholomew's separation from his wife, also an artist of international repute, had made big news a couple of years ago. Their ten-year marriage had been a constant feature in the gossip columns, fraught as it was with acrimony and recriminations before the final split. The artist, it was reported, had taken it badly – even an arch-cynic like Bartholomew, I read, had a heart which could be hurt – unless it was his ego that had suffered. For a year he had lived the life of a recluse, emerging only when he moved to the Oasis for an extended period of work.

Tonight Bartholomew looked far from well. He was a handsome man in his early fifties, with a tanned face and dark hair greying fashionably at the temples – but now he looked drawn, his dark eyes tired.

Someone asked, "Original in form?" in a tone of incredulity which prompted a sharp response.

"Of course!" Bartholomew said. "I am aware that this is a bold claim to make, but it is nevertheless true, as you will learn when I exhibit the piece. I have utilized a prototype continuum-frame to harness an electro-analogue of my psyche..."

There was an instant babble of comment. A critic said, "Can we have that again?" and scribbled it down when Bartholomew patiently repeated himself.

"But what exactly is it?" someone asked.

Bartholomew held up both hands. "You will find out tomorrow. I assure you that its originality of form will be more than matched by its content."

Roberts, from where he was leaning against the balustrade, asked, "I take it that this is an example of a work of art which you would contend is worth a human life?" He smiled to himself with the knowledge of what he was doing.

Bartholomew calculated his response. He was aware that all eyes were on him, aware that his reply would re-open the old argument between him and Ralph Standish – which was exactly what the onlookers were anticipating.

Bartholomew gave the slightest of nods. "Yes, Doctor. In my opinion my latest piece is of sufficient merit to be worth the sacrifice."

Ralph frowned into his whisky, his lips pursed grimly. Bartholomew had made a similar declaration in the pages of a respected arts' journal a couple of years ago, and Ralph had responded with a series of angry letters.

I would not reply now, convinced that he would only be playing Bartholomew's childish game if he did so. But all eyes were on him, and he could not let the comment pass.

"Your views sicken me, Perry – but you know that. We've had this out many times before. I see no need to cover old ground."

"But whatever not, my friend? Surely you are able to defend your corner, or perhaps you fear losing the argument?"

Ralph made a sound that was part laugh, part grunt of indignation. "Losing it? I thought I'd won it years ago!"

Bartholomew smiled. "You merely stated your case with precision and eloquence, if I may say so. But you signally failed to convince me. Therefore you cannot claim victory."

Ralph was shaking his head. "What will it take to convince you that your philosophy is morally objectionable?"

"My dear Ralph, I might ask you the very same question." Perry Bartholomew smiled. He was enjoying himself. "So far as I am concerned, I occupy the moral high ground –"

"I cannot accept that art is more important than humanity," Ralph began.

"You," Bartholomew cut in, "are a traitor to your art."

"And you, a traitor to humanity."

"Ralph, Ralph," Bartholomew laughed, condescending. "I consider my view the height of humanity. I merely contend that a supreme work of art, which will bring insight and enlightenment to generations, is worth the life of some peasant in Asia or wherever. What was that old moral dilemma? 'Would you wish dead one Chinaman if by doing so you would gain unlimited wealth?' Well, in this case the unlimited wealth is in the form of a work of art for all humanity to appreciate in perpetuity."

Ralph was shaking his head. "I disagree," he said. "But why don't we throw the question open? What do you think? Anyone? Richard?"

I cleared my throat, nervous. I looked across at Bartholomew. "I side with Ralph," I said. "I also think your example of 'one Asian peasant' is spurious and misleading."

Bartholomew threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, you do, do you? But what should I expect from one of Ralph's disciples?"

"That's unfair, Perry," Ralph cut in. "Richard has a valid point."

"Perhaps," I said, "you might be less willing to expend a human life if that life was closer to home. Your own, for instance?"

Bartholomew regarded me with startlingly blue eyes, unflinching. "I state categorically that my life is worth nothing beside the existence of a truly fine work of art."

"That," Ralph said, taking over the argument, "is letting Perry off the hook too easily." He swirled the contents of his tumbler, regarding Bartholomew across the table. "Would you be as willing to lay down the life of someone you loved?"

I was suddenly aware of a charged silence on the patio.

Everyone was watching Perry Bartholomew as he considered his wine glass, a slight smile of amusement playing on his lips. "Perhaps we should first of all conduct a semantic analysis of what you mean by the word 'love'?"

Ralph was red in the face by now. "You know damn well what I mean. But to counter your cynicism, I'll rephrase the question: would you lay down the life of someone close to you for a work of art?"

Bartholomew thought about this, a consummate performer playing the cynosure. "Would I?" he said at last. "That is a very interesting question. If I were to be true to my ideals, then by all means I should. Perhaps though, in my weakness, I would not..." He paused there, and I thought we had him. Then he continued, "But if I did not, if I chose the life of someone close to me over the existence of a work of art — then I would be morally wrong in doing so, prey to temporary and sentimental aberration."

Ralph massaged his eyes with thumb and forefinger in a weary gesture of despair. He looked up suddenly. "I pity you, Perry. I really do. Don't you realize, it's the thing that you call the 'sentimental aberration' that is at the very heart of each of us — that thing called love, which you claim not to know?"

Bartholomew merely stared at him, that superior smile on his lips. "I think we should have that semantic debate, after all."

"You can't apply your reductionist sciences to human emotion, damn you!"

"I think perhaps I could, and disprove for good the notion of love."

Ralph then said something which I did not understand: "You don't convince me, Perry — for all your cynicism." He got to his feet. "But I can see that I'm wasting my time. If you'll excuse me, I'll bid you good night." He nodded at Bartholomew and left the patio with a quiet dignity that won the respect of everyone present.

Bartholomew gave a listless wave and watched him go, a twist of sardonic amusement in his expression. "Romantics!" he said with venom when Ralph was out of earshot.

The party broke up soon after that and I retired to my dome.

I woke late the following morning, breakfasted on the balcony overlooking the lawns, and then strolled around the oasis towards Ralph's dome. A couple of days earlier I'd finished the sculpture I had been working on, and I was still in that phase of contented self-satisfaction which follows creation.

I was passing beneath the pendant globe of Perry Bartholomew's dome when I heard his summons.

"Ah, Richard... Just the man. Do you think I might borrow your body for a minute or two?" He was leaning from an upper balcony, attired in a green silk dressing gown. "I require a little assistance in moving my exhibit."

After his arrogance last night, I was tempted to ignore him. The Oasis had attendants to do the manual labour, but at the moment they were busy with other artists' work on the concourse beside the water, ready for the judging of the competition tomorrow. I was about to call up to him that I was busy and that he'd have to wait until the attendants were free, when I recalled his overblown claims concerning his latest work of art. My curiosity was piqued.

I nodded. "I'll be right up," I said.

I passed beneath the globe and entered the escalator shaft which carried me up to the central lounge. The door slid open and I paused on the threshold. "Enter, dear boy," Bartholomew called from another room. "I'm dressing. I'll be with you in a minute."

I stepped into a large, circular room covered with a luxurious, cream carpet more like a pelt, and equipped with sunken sofa bunkers. Several of Bartholomew's abstract sculptures occupied prominent positions — hard, angular designs in grey metals, striking in their ugliness.

Bartholomew emerged on the far side of the room. "Good of you to help me, dear boy. The attendants are never around when one needs them."

He wore a white suit with a pink cravat, and seen at close quarters I was struck by how seedy, how ill the man appeared. He liked to project an image of foppish sophistication, but such a display from someone so evidently unwell seemed merely pathetic.

"I hope Ralph hasn't taken the huff over our disagreement last night?"

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't seen him today."

Bartholomew chuckled. "The man is a silly old goat," he said. "When will he learn?"

I was stung. I was about to respond that Ralph was a fine artist and a good man, then paused. "Learn what?" I asked, suspicious.

Bartholomew crossed to a pedestal arrayed with bottles and glasses. "Would you care for a drink, Richard?"

I told him that it was a little too early for me, frustrated by his calculated reticence. He was clearly playing another of his infuriating mind games. He poured himself a large brandy, turned and considered me. "Learn," he said, "not to take so seriously my little digs. Our differences of opinion hardly matter."

"They matter to Ralph," I said. "He objects strongly to your philosophy. What should he do? Sit back and let your comments go unopposed?"

"But my dear boy, don't you think that I object to his philosophy? I assure you, I find his sentimentality just as sickening as he evidently finds my...my realism." He sighed. "It's a pity we can't still be

friends. We were once very close, you know?"

I hesitated. Ralph rarely spoke of his friendship with Bartholomew. "What happened?"

"Oh, we encountered different circumstances, experienced divergent phenomena, and adopted our own philosophies to deal with them. Ralph was always an idealist, a romantic at heart. I was a realist, and the more I experienced, the more I came to see that my view of the world was the right one. Ralph has always had it too easy." He shrugged. "We've reached the stage now where our respective views are irreconcilable. I think he's a woolly-minded bleeding heart, and he no doubt thinks me a hard-nosed neo-fascist. But you know this – you probably think of me in the same way." He smiled, challengingly, across at me.

I murmured something to the contrary and avoided his gaze, wishing I had the strength to tell him what I really thought.

While he was speaking, I noticed a holo-cube on a polished wooden table in the centre of the room. It was large, perhaps half a metre square, and depicted a brown-limbed little girl in a bright blue dress, with masses of black hair and big eyes of lustrous obsidian. The contradiction between Bartholomew's ideals, and the display of such a romantic work of art, was not lost on me.

I crossed the room and paused beside the table. "It's quite beautiful," I said.

"I'm glad you like it. She is my daughter, Elegy."

"Your daughter?" I was taken aback, surprised first of all that he had a daughter, and then that he should choose to display her image in a holo-cube for all to see.

"The child," he said, "is incredibly intelligent. Precocious, in fact. She will go far." And, with that, any notion that Bartholomew had succumbed to paternal sentiment was erased. For him, the holo-cube of his daughter was merely a reminder of her intelligence quotient.

"She celebrates her eighth birthday tomorrow," he went on. "She is visiting me directly from her boarding school in Rome. You'll be able to debate world affairs with her, Richard."

I ignored the sarcasm. "I look forward to meeting her."

Bartholomew smiled. "But come, I'm keeping you. Please, this way."

We took a spiral staircase down to his studio. I recalled that he had described his work last night as utilizing a prototype continuum-frame, and I wondered what to expect. The large, circular chamber was filled with sunlight and the machinery of his art: power tools, computers, slabs of steel and other raw materials.

He gestured across the room to his latest creation, standing against the far wall. It was a heavy, industrial-looking metal frame, hexagonal and perhaps three metres high – for all the world like the nut of a giant nut and bolt. It was not the dull, rusting frame, however, that was the work of art, but what the frame contained: an eerie, cobalt glow, shot through with white light, like fireworks exploding in slow motion. As I stared at it I convinced myself that I could make out vague shapes and forms, human figures and faces,

surfacing from within the glow. But the images never remained long enough, or appeared with sufficient definition, for me to be sure. I might merely have been imagining the forms. The piece did, however, fill me with unease.

"The frame is an early prototype of the telemass portal," Bartholomew said. "It's about fifty years old – there are still a few of them about in the odd spaceyard. I bought it for an absolute fortune when I realized it could be put to artistic use. What you see at its centre is a section of the ur-continuum, the timeless, spaceless form that underpins reality. It was once known as the *nada*-continuum, in the time of the big-ships, and Enginemen tell tales of it as being Nirvana, and filled with wonder. Of course, we now know that it was filled with nothing but the creations of their own psyches – which gave me the idea for this piece."

He indicated a computer keyboard set into the frame. "I programmed it directly from here –" tapping his head – "and it was the gruelling work of almost a year. It is totally original in form and content, and well worth the agony of creation."

"Is it titled?" I asked.

Bartholomew nodded. "Experience," he said.

I looked from what might have been a woman's face, screaming in terror, to the artist. "I'm impressed," I said.

He barked a laugh. "You Romantics! Unlike your work, this is not merely visual. It was created with the express intention of being participated in. Go ahead, pass through."

I stared again into its pulsing cobalt depths, veined with coruscating light, and stepped onto the plinth.

I glanced back at Bartholomew. "Are you quite sure?"

"Of course, my dear boy! Don't be afraid. I'll follow in, if you wish."

I nodded uncertainly, wondering if I was doing the right thing. With reluctance, and not a little fear, I took one hesitant pace into the blue light. I was immediately enveloped in the glow, and without points of reference to guide my senses I experienced instant disorientation and nausea. I felt as though I were weightless and spinning out of control, head over heel.

More disconcerting that the physical discomfort, however, was the psychological. Whereas seen from outside the images in the glow were fleeting, nebulous, now they assailed me, or rather appeared in my mind's eye, full-blown and frightening. I beheld human forms bent and twisted in horrifying torques of torture – limbs elasticating to breaking-point, torsos wound like springs of flesh, faces stretched into caricatures of agony. These depredations were merely the physical counterpart of a prevailing mental anguish which permeated, at Bartholomew's perverted behest, this nightmare continuum. And beyond this, as the intellectual sub-text to the work of art, there invaded my head the ethos that humanity is driven by the subconscious devil of rapacity, power and reward – to the total exclusion of the attributes of selflessness, altruism and love.

Then, one pace later – though I seemed to have suffered the ur-reality for hours – I was out of the frame and in the blessed sanity of the real world. As the horror of the experience gradually diminished, I took in my surroundings. I had assumed I would come

out in the narrow gap between the frame and the wall – but to my amazement I found myself in the adjacent room. I turned and stared. Projecting from the wall – through which I had passed – was a horizontal column of blue light, extending perhaps halfway into the room. As I watched, Bartholomew stepped from the glowing bar of light – the artist emerging from his work – and smiled at me. “Well, Richard, what do you think?” He regarded me intently, a torturer’s gleam in his eye.

To my shame I said, “It’s incredible,” when I should have had the courage to say, “If that’s the state of your psyche, then I pity you.” I only hoped that the agony I had experienced within the frame was a partial, or exaggerated, reflection of Bartholomew’s state of mind.

“The depth of the beam can be increased from one metre to around fifteen. The devices are still used in shipyards and factories to transport heavy goods over short distances. I’ll show you...” He stepped into the next room, and while he was gone I marvelled at how he could prattle on so matter-of-factly about the mechanics of something so monstrous.

Then I reminded myself that Bartholomew believed he had created here a work of lasting art.

Before me, the beam extended even further into the room, almost touching the far viewscreen. Then it decreased in length to just one metre. He shortened it even further and, as if by magic, the wall suddenly appeared.

I returned to the studio. The blue glow pulsed malignantly in the frame, giving off subtle images of agony and waves of despair.

“We’ll leave it at its original setting,” Bartholomew said. “It’s easier to move that way.”

For the next thirty minutes we edged the frame onto a wheeled trolley and rolled it into the elevator. “We must handle it with the utmost care!” Bartholomew warned. “I know through bitter experience that the slightest jolt might eliminate the analogues imprinted upon the ur-reality. The aspects of my psyche programmed within it exist tremulously. If we should drop it now...”

We emerged into the sunlight, and I had never been so thankful to experience fresh air as I was then. We gingerly trolleyed the great frame along a tiled path to the concourse, Bartholomew flinching at the slightest jolt or wobble on the way. Part of me wanted nothing more than to topple the frame, but the moralist in me – or the coward – overruled the urge. At journey’s end a couple of attendants helped us ease the frame to the ground. “Careful!” Bartholomew shouted. “It should be treated with the greatest respect. The slightest mishandling...”

By now, word was out that Perry Bartholomew was exhibiting his magnum opus, and a crowd had gathered before the frame like supplicants at the portals of a cathedral.

I took the opportunity, as Bartholomew prepared to make a speech, to slip away. Filled with a residuum of unease from my experience of Experience, I made my way around the oasis to Ralph Standish’s dome.

I entered without knocking and made my way to the studio. I paused on the gallery that encircled the sunken working area. Ralph was standing in the centre of the room, holding his chin and contem-



plating the small figures playing out a drama of his own devising below me. The figures were perhaps half life-sized, at this distance very realistic, though seen at close quarters, as I had on earlier occasions, they were slightly blurred and ill-defined. I had been surprised to find Ralph dabbling in graphics when I joined him here last year – he usually spurned computer-generated art forms – but he had reassured me that though the method might be modern, the resultant work would be traditional.

He looked up and saw me. "Rich, come on down." He pressed a foot-pedal to kill the projectors hidden in the walls. The strutting figures flickered briefly and winked out of existence.

I descended the steps. "How are you this morning?" I asked. I was a little concerned about him after last night's run-in with Bartholomew.

"Never better!" He beamed at me. He wore his old paint-stained shirt, splashed with the wine he squirted from a goatskin at frequent intervals. "Last night did me the world of good."

"It did? I must admit, I was surprised when you invited Bartholomew to join us."

"I'd been avoiding him for the better part of the year," Ralph said. "Last night I thought I'd give him the benefit of the doubt – see if he was still as eager to expound his odious views."

"Well, you certainly found out."

"It made me feel wonderful, Rich. Made me even more convinced that my ideas are right – not that I was ever in any doubt." He peered closely at me. "Talking about feeling wonderful, you're looking terrible."

I was surprised it showed. "Well... Bartholomew just called me in to help him move his latest work of genius –"

"You didn't actually enter the thing?"

"So you know about it?"

"He invited me across earlier this year, before you arrived. I stepped into it then, though at the time it was still in its early stages."

"What did you think?"

"I was appalled, of course. The thing's an abomination. I dread to think what it's like now he's completed it." He directed a line of vino expertly into his mouth, pursed his lips around it and nodded. "To be honest, the whole episode's a tragedy. Quite apart from poisoning the minds of all who enter it, its creation has made him quite ill both physically and mentally. Did you notice, Rich, that the figures within the unreality were female?"

I recalled the twisted travesties of the human form I had experienced in the blue light. "Now you come to mention it..." I said. "Yes, I think they were."

Ralph nodded. "Did you also notice that they were all aspects of the same person – Electra Perpetuum, his wife?"

"They were? Christ, how he must hate her!"

Ralph perched himself on the arm of a chesterfield, watching me closely. "Do you want my honest opinion, Richard?" There was a light in his eyes, an enthusiasm in his attitude.

I smiled. "Do I have any choice?"

Ralph was too occupied with his own thoughts to notice my affectionate sarcasm. "I think that although Perry might want to hate her, in fact he still loves her."

I smiled. "I'm not sure he knows the meaning of the word."

"Of course he does! He's human, dammit! He might have experienced tragedy and hardship over the years, which have no doubt hardened him, but in here –" Ralph thumped his chest – "in here he's like all the rest of us. He's a fallible human being."

"What makes you think he still loves Perpetuum?"

Ralph hesitated. "I was with him when he first met Electra," he told me. "That was ten years ago – at the time he was just getting over his disastrous relationship with the vid-star Bo Ventura. We were still quite close friends. He was not quite the cynic he is now, but he was getting that way – I could see that from his criticism of my work, his views on art and life in general. When he started seeing Electra, I thought perhaps she might be good for him. She was – still is – his total opposite: warm, loving, generous to a fault. She lived life at a pace which honestly frightened me. I thought that Perry might be good for her, too – might slow her down a little, provide a calming influence... I saw them at intervals of perhaps a year over the next six or seven years. I was still on socializing terms with Perry, though things were getting pretty heated between us at the end. For the first few years, everything was fine between him and Electra..."

"And then?"

"Perry became ever more distant, withdrawn into himself and his thoughts. He alienated her with his philosophy, reducing everything to basic animal responses, where emotions like love had no place. Life to him became a vast, meaningless farce. When he published the articles attacking me and my work, Electra could stand no more."

Ralph paused there, then went on, "Anyway, she met someone else. I know it wasn't serious. She used this man as a means to escape from Perry. That was two years ago. I saw him shortly after the separation, and on the surface it was as if nothing at all had happened. He was still working hard, turning out his empty, minimalist sculptures. But about a month after Electra left, Perry went into hiding, became a recluse for a year. He saw no one, and I guessed that he didn't want to admit to the people who knew him that he'd been affected. He turned up here a year ago, and that... that thing is his first response to the end of his relationship with Electra."

"But it's a monument of his hate for Perpetuum," I said. "How can you possibly claim he still loves her?"

Ralph shook his head, emphatic. "I know the man, Richard. He's torn apart by a great contradiction at the heart of his life. He intellectually believes that such things as love, friendship, altruism do not exist – he thinks they're how we rationalize our animal instincts. And yet he loves Electra, he loves his daughter, even though these feelings don't fit in with his reductionism. That work he calls Experience is, in my opinion, a response to the anguish of his separation from his wife. The only way he can overcome what he sees as the aberration of his feelings for Electra is by creating a work which he hopes will at once validate his cynicism and exorcise her from his mind."

"You almost sound sorry for him," I commented.

"Oh, I am, Richard. The man needs saving from himself."

I recalled the holo-cube of his daughter. As much as I found it hard to believe that Perry Bartholomew did indeed, as Ralph suggested, harbour human feelings in his heart, there was the memento of Elegy he kept on display in his lounge. I mentioned this. "I assumed it was merely to remind him of her intellect," I said.

"He purposefully gives that impression," Ralph said. "But believe me, he loves her. Why else would he agree to having her stay with him over her birthday?"

I was not totally convinced. "Because he wants to impress everyone with her genius?" I suggested.

Ralph smiled to himself. "We'll see," he said. "It should be quite an interesting few days."

He climbed from the chesterfield and moved to the balcony. I joined him. Across the sparkling expanse of the water, the concourse was thronged with a crowd of artists. Bartholomew's continuum-frame was the centre of attention. Ralph smiled to himself. "Will they ever learn?" he said.

I glanced at my watch. The sight of all the work arranged on the concourse reminded me that I had yet to exhibit my own piece. I would put the finishing touches to it that afternoon. "What are you doing this evening, Ralph?"

"Working, unfortunately. I have a few things I want to get ready for tomorrow."

We made arrangements to meet for breakfast and I left for my dome. I took the long way around the oasis, so as to avoid the crowd and the malign aura that surrounded Perry Bartholomew's latest work of art.

Ralph was in good humour the following morning as we breakfasted on the patio overlooking the oasis. He buttered his toast lavishly, as if it were a palette, and gestured with it as he told me about a group of new artists whose work he admired. He was prone to mood swings, depending on how his work was progressing, and I could only assume that it was going well now.

Below us, on the concourse, a cover had been erected to protect the exhibits from the effects of the sun. People strolled down the aisles formed by the works, pausing occasionally to admire a piece more closely. Bartholomew's continuum-frame, huge and ungainly, looked out of place among the smaller crystals, sculptures and paintings.

I was about to comment that the piece would be more at home in a breaker's yard when the artist himself rode up the escalator and crossed the patio. As he passed our table he inclined his head. "Gentlemen." He appeared rather frail this morning, his white suit hanging on his tall frame.

Ralph gestured, swallowed a bite of toast. "Perry, why not join us?"

Bartholomew paused, raised an eyebrow. "I think perhaps I might," he said. "Very kind of you."

He seated himself at the table and ordered breakfast – a single cup of black coffee. I felt uneasy in his presence. I recalled what Ralph had said yesterday about saving Bartholomew from himself, but wished that Ralph had waited until I was elsewhere to indulge his missionary streak.

Bartholomew nodded towards the exhibition. "When does the fun begin, Ralph?"

"This afternoon, when the judges arrive."

Bartholomew nodded. He had the ability to make his every gesture regal. "And who might they be?"

"Ah... can't tell you that. Utmost secrecy. Competition rules..."

Bartholomew smiled and sipped his coffee. His attitude suggested that he thought the result of the contest a foregone conclusion. "I see Delgado's showing a crystal. I rather like his work."

Ralph didn't, and was usually vocal about the fact. "He has a certain technical expertise," he said.

They continued with this vein of light banter, and I ceased to listen. I moved my chair back and propped my feet on the balustrade, enjoying the sun.

I was the first to notice them – two small figures hurrying around the oasis towards the patio. They almost ran up the escalator, and this exertion, in an environment where a leisurely stroll was de rigueur, caused me to sit up. The two men stepped from the escalator and crossed the patio. I recognized Roberts, the resident physician, and with him was a man in the uniform of a chauffeur: he walked with a limp and his jacket was scuffed and ripped.

They paused at our table.

Roberts cleared his throat. "Mr Bartholomew..."

The artist looked up, irritated at the interruption. "Yes? What is it?" His gaze took in the unlikely pair without any sign of consternation. At the sight of Roberts' diffidence and the chauffeur's bruised face, my stomach turned sickeningly.

"Mr Bartholomew... I'm afraid there's been an accident..."

"Elegy?" Bartholomew's face was expressionless. "Where is she?"

"If you'd care to come with me," Roberts said.

Ralph took Bartholomew's elbow and we followed the doctor down the descending escalator, across the concourse and through the main gates of the Oasis.

"What happened?" Bartholomew demanded.

Beside us, the chauffeur was tearful, shaking from the delayed effects of shock. "I took the bend too fast... There was nothing I could do. I tried to..."

Outside the gates stood the open-top, two-seater Mercedes, its flanks buckled and scraped, the windshield mangled as if it had taken a roll. The hairs on the nape of my neck stood on end. I expected to find Elegy – the small, sun-browned girl I'd first seen yesterday in the holo-cube – lying dead or injured on the front seat.

To my relief the Mercedes was empty.

Bartholomew cleared his throat. "Where is she?" he asked.

"I'll drive this car back to the scene of the accident," Roberts said. He beckoned the chauffeur. "You'll have to direct me. Standish, you bring Perry in my pickup." He indicated a small truck in the parking lot.

While Roberts and the chauffeur climbed into the Mercedes, we shepherded Bartholomew across the tarmac towards the truck. Outside the air-conditioned confines of the complex, the heat was merciless.

Ralph took the wheel and Bartholomew sat between us. We lurched from the car-park and along the straight, raised road after the battered Mercedes.

Bartholomew sat with his hands on his knees, staring into the shimmering heat haze ahead of us. I wanted to yell at him that he could show some sign

of emotion, that we would fully understand.

"Why didn't the driver bring her back?" he said at last, as we bucketed over the uneven surface. "Even if she were dead, he should have returned with her body..."

In the driver's seat, Ralph gripped the wheel and stared grimly ahead. I said, "Roberts wouldn't be coming out here if she'd died..." I felt faint at the thought of what injuries Elegy might have sustained.

Ten minutes later the road began to climb into a range of low hills, no more than an outcropping of rocks and boulders, the only feature on the face of the flat, wind-sculpted desert. The surface of the road deteriorated and the truck lurched drunkenly from rut to pot hole and back again.

We rounded a bend. Ahead, the Mercedes had pulled into the side of the road. As Ralph eased the truck to a halt behind it, Roberts and the chauffeur climbed out, crossed the road and walked out onto a flat slab of rock. The chauffeur pointed to something below him.

"Christ," I said, unable to stop myself. "She's down there."

I jumped from the cab and ran across the road. The result of the Mercedes' prolonged skid was imprinted on the tarmac like double exclamation marks. Crystalized glass and flakes of paint littered the great anvil of rock across which the car had rolled.

Roberts was kneeling over a narrow fissure. The rock, perhaps the size of an Oasis dome, had split into two uneven sections. One section comprised the greater part, while the other was no more than a sliver, perhaps a metre thick.

I joined Roberts and the African and stared into the crevice. Ten metres down, wedged upright and illuminated by a bright shaft of sunlight, was Elegy Perpetuum. Her head was turned at an unnatural angle, clamped between the two great slabs. She was staring up at us with an expression that comprised both terror and entreaty.

Ralph and Bartholomew joined us.

Ralph, in a gesture of support, was gripping Bartholomew's arm just above the elbow. The latter stared into the fissure and, at the sight of his daughter, winced. It was his only concession to anguish, and seemed suitably in character.

Roberts was attempting to squirm down after the girl, and there was something faintly ludicrous, and at the same time terribly touching, about his futile efforts. He gave up at last and knelt, panting and staring down helplessly.

As my gaze adjusted to the sunlight and shadow in the well of the crevice, I made out greater detail. Elegy was wearing a red dress, and I saw that what I had at first taken to be red strips of material hanging down her arms were in fact rivulets of blood. There was more blood on the slab of rock near the surface, splashed like patches of alien lichen.

"Elegy," Roberts called. "Can you hear me? Take deep breaths and try not to panic. We'll have you out in no time."

The girl stared up at us, blinked. If she'd heard, she gave no sign. She began to cry, a thin, pitiful whimpering reaching us from the depths.

Bartholomew knelt and peered down. He looked at

Roberts. "Is there nothing you can do?" To his credit, there was a tremor in his voice.

"I contacted Timbuctoo as soon as I found out what had happened. They won't be here for another two, three hours." Roberts shook his head, went on under his breath, "But she might not last that long. She's bleeding badly and God knows what internal injuries she's received."

Bartholomew, down on one hand and knee like a dishevelled, ageing sprinter, just closed his eyes and kept them closed, in a gesture more demonstrative of despair than any amount of vocal bewailing.

Suddenly I could no longer bear to watch – either the little girl in agony, or Bartholomew in his own mental anguish. My redundancy, my utter inability to do a thing to help, only emphasized my fear that Bartholomew might resent my presence.

I strode over to the edge of the rock, taking measured breaths and trying to quell my shaking. Elegy's continual, plaintive whimpering, echoing eerily in the chasm, cut its way through the hot air and into our hearts.

There was a drop of perhaps ten metres to the shale-covered slope of the hillside. Elegy, pinned between the two planes, was positioned a little way above the surface of the hill. It occurred to me that if only we had the right tools to cut through the flakes of rock...

I returned to the small group gathered around the dark crevice. "Are you sure there's nothing back at the Oasis? Drills, cutting tools – even a sledge hammer? The rock down there can't be more than a metre thick."

Roberts shook his head. "Don't you think I've considered that? We might have hammers, but we'd never smash through the rock before the emergency team arrives."

From down below, a pathetic voice called out, "Daddy!"

"Elegy, I'm here. We'll get you out soon. Try not to cry."

"I'm all bleeding!" she wailed. "My leg hurts."

As we watched, she choked, coughed, and blood bubbled over her lips and down her chin.

"Elegy..." Bartholomew pleaded, tears appearing in his eyes.

"We've got to do something," I said. "We can't just..."

Ralph was squatting beside Bartholomew, holding him. He looked up at me then and stared, and it was as if the idea occurred to both of us at the same time.

"Christ," I said, "the continuum-frame..."

I felt suddenly dizzy at the thought.

Ralph looked from me to Bartholomew. "It might just work, Perry..."

"We could position it down there on the hillside," I went on. "If we took the truck we could have it back here in twenty minutes."

I knelt beside Bartholomew, who was staring down at his daughter, his expression frozen as if he had heard not a word we had said. "It's the only way to save her – we need the frame!"

He slowly turned his head and stared at me, stricken. Some subconscious part of me might have been aware of the incredible irony of what I was asking Bartholomew to sanction, but all I could think of at the time was the salvation of Elegy Perpetuum.

"It would never survive the journey," he said in

almost a whisper. "Everything would be lost."

Roberts exploded. "Jesus! That's your daughter down there! If we don't get her out of that bloody hole she won't survive much longer!"

Bartholomew peered down the crevice at Elegy, who stared up at him mutely with massive, beseeching eyes. "You don't know what it cost me to create the piece," he said. "It's unique, irreplaceable. I could never do another quite like it..."

In rage I gripped his arm and shook him. "Elegy's unique, for chrissake! She's irreplaceable. Are you going to let her bleed to death?"

Something snapped within him, and his face registered a terrible capitulation. He closed his eyes and nodded. "Very well..." he said. "Very well, use the frame."

I hauled him to his feet and we hurried across the road. With Ralph's help I assisted Bartholomew into the back of the truck, where we stood side by side clutching the bulkhead. Roberts and the chauffeur climbed into the cab and started the vehicle, and we rumbled off down the road at breakneck speed, Bartholomew rocking impassively from side to side between us. He stared into the never-ending sky and said not a word as the desert sped by.

Ten minutes later we roared through the gates of the Oasis, manoeuvred through the concourse and backed up to the continuum-frame. We enlisted the aid of two attendants and for the next five minutes, with Bartholomew looking on and pleading with us to be careful, jacked the frame level with the back of the truck and dragged it aboard. Bartholomew insisted on travelling with it, as if his presence might ease its passage, and Ralph and I joined him in the back. We accelerated from the concourse and through the gates, leaving a posse of on-lookers gaping in amazement.

As the truck raced along the desert road and into the hills, Bartholomew clung to the great rusting frame and gazed into the radiance at its centre, its veined depths reflecting in his bright blue eyes. We lurched over pot-holes and the frame rocked back and forth. Bartholomew stared at me, mute appeal in his eyes. "It's going!" he called out. "I'm losing it!"

I stared into the swirling cobalt glow. As I watched, the marmoreal threads of white luminance began to fade. I could only assume that these threads were the physical manifestation of Bartholomew's sick, psychic contribution to the piece, the phenomena I had experienced as tortured flesh and acute mental anguish. Over a period of minutes the white light dissolved and the bright glow waned to sky blue, and Bartholomew simply closed his eyes as he had at the plight of his daughter.

Before we arrived at the scene of the accident, the truck turned off the road and backed up to the great slab in which Elegy was imprisoned. We halted a metre from the face of the rock and Bartholomew, like a man in a trance, extended the blue beam into the boulder.

Then we jumped from the truck and climbed up the hillside. We gathered around the crevice, peering down to judge how near the beam was to the girl. I stood beside Bartholomew as he stared at his daughter, and at his expression of compassion tempered



by terrible regret I felt an inexpressible pity for the man.

"We'll have you out in no time!" I called down to her.

She was staring up at us, blinking bravely. We were not so far off with the beam. It penetrated the rock one metre beyond her; all that was required was for someone to shift the frame a little closer to the girl.

When I looked up, Ralph, Roberts and the chauffeur were no longer with us. I assumed they had returned to the truck. I took Bartholomew's arm in reassurance and turned my attention to the girl.

I stared down into the crevice, expecting to see the beam move closer to the girl and encompass her in its radiance. Instead, the beam remained where it was...

I thought at first that my eyesight was at fault: I seemed to be looking through Elegy's crimson dress, through her round brown face and appealing eyes. As I watched, the girl became ever more indistinct, insubstantial – she seemed to be dematerializing before our very eyes. And then, along with all the blood, her image flickered briefly like a defective fluorescent and winked out of existence.

I had seen an identical vanishing act somewhere before – in Ralph's studio, just yesterday...

I looked at Bartholomew, and saw his face register at first shock, and then sudden understanding.

He stood and turned. "Standish..." he cried, more in despair than rage at the deception. "Standish!"

But by this time Ralph, along with the other flesh-and-blood actors in his little drama, had taken the Mercedes and were speeding along the road towards Sapphire Oasis.

Which was not quite the end of the affair.

I drove Bartholomew back in the truck, and we unloaded the continuum-frame and set it among the other works of art on the concourse. Evidently word had got back that something had happened in the desert: a crowd had gathered, and artists watched from the balconies of the domes overlooking the concourse.

Bartholomew noticed nothing. He busied himself with the keyboard set into the frame. "There still might be something in there I can salvage," he told me. "Something I can build on..."

I just smiled at him and began to walk away.

I was stopped in my tracks by a cry from a nearby dome.

"Daddy!"

Bartholomew turned and stared. Elegy Perpetuum, radiant in a bright blue dress and ribbons, walked quickly across the concourse towards her father, as upright as a little soldier. She ran the rest of the way and launched herself into his arms, and Bartholomew lifted her off the ground and hugged her to his chest.

She was followed by a tall, olive-skinned woman in a red trouser-suit. I recognized her face from a hundred art programmes and magazines – the burning eyes, the strong Berber features: Electra Perpetuum.

I was aware of someone at my side.

"Ralph!" I hissed. "How the hell did she get here?"

"I invited her, of course – to judge the contest." He smiled at me. "I've told her about everything that happened out there."

Electra paused at the centre of the concourse, an arm's length from Bartholomew. He lowered his daughter to the ground and stared at his wife.

"I know what you did, Perry," Electra said in a voice choked with emotion. "But what I want to know is, do you think you made the right decision?"

I realized, as I watched Perry Bartholomew regard Electra and his daughter for what seemed like minutes, that what Ralph Standish had created before us was either the last act of a drama in the finest of romantic traditions – or a tragedy.

It seemed that everyone in the Oasis was willing Bartholomew to give the right reply. Beside me, Ralph clenched his fist and cursed him under his breath.

Bartholomew stared at Electra, seemingly seeing through her, as he considered his past and contemplated his future...

And then, with a dignity and courage I never expect to witness again, Perry Bartholomew stepped forward, took the hands of his wife and daughter and, between Electra and Elegy, moved from the concourse and left behind him the destitute monument of his continuum-frame.

Eric Brown has recently completed his first novel, which has been accepted for publication by Pan Books. His collection *The Time-Lapsed Man and Other Stories* (1990) gained much praise. His last appearance in these pages was with "The Nilakantha Scream" (issue 48). He lives in Haworth, West Yorkshire.

CHANGES OF ADDRESS

Please, when you send *Interzone* a change-of-address notification remember to inform us what it is for (and, if you're a subscriber, please try to inform us which issue your sub expires with – the number should follow your name on your mailing label).

The reason we ask this is that we are now running two magazines from IZ's address; also, persons who submit stories (but are not subscribers) are sometimes in the habit of sending us address changes without telling us that they refer to manuscript submissions. Thus confusions arise, and we waste time searching for non-existent records in the subscription files.

It would also be helpful if you could remind us of your old address as well as the new one.

This will not be easy to say. The novels of Orson Scott Card are hard to like, but must be loved. I (for one) do not like their primness, their religiosity, their stifling narrow knowledge about the human condition, the cheap populisms they espouse, or the manipulative tricks of plot and rhetoric they play on readers. I do not like — if a term so mild can seem appropriate — the Despite they contain, the sense that the talent that informs the books is bigger than the author who writes them. But nothing of this can stanch one's helpless love for the thing made: for the sweet acid of the writing, the icy clarity of the examinations of soul, the genius of register so that you cannot think of another way to put lessons which it may be impossible to swallow, the story-telling urgency, the knife of dialogue. It is not easy to say, but Orson Scott Card is something of a genius. It is perhaps easier to say (because we're only human) that if he is indeed something of a genius, that genius may have already spoiled, being too big for its pot.

We should look at Ender. There are now three novels in the sequence: *Ender's Game* (1985), expanded from the 1977 novella which was Card's first published sf story; *Speaker for the Dead* (1986), which like its predecessor won both Hugo and Nebula awards; and *Xenocide* (Tor, \$21.95), which seems for a couple of hundred pages to be moving towards a conclusion, but which does not end, after all, when the last page turns up.

Quite famously, the first novel describes the transfiguration by force of a six-year-old boy named Ender Wiggin into a polished street-wise teenaged strategist capable of remote-controlling, via ansible, the huge fleet Earth has been dispatching in phased spasms for decades at sub-light speeds to invest the home planet of the buggers, an insectoid race which decades earlier had attacked humanity. Knowing — or at any rate believing they know — that the buggers will attack again, the military authorities of Earth have created, for the training of Ender and others like him, a nightmarish environment within the orbital that serves as kindergarten and academy and killing field. Nothing there is as it seems, nor is Ender. With his two siblings — of whom more in a moment — he represents a genetic experiment about which Card is never specific, though it may be that, as Gordon R. Dickson claimed of his Dorsai Donal Graeme, they are supposed to share a kind of cognitive intuition, which gives them speed and balance and a profound understanding of the human animal in action; in any case, as a proto-superboy, Ender is subjected to the intensest possible training, which means that he is cheated to and manipulated more radically than any of his fellows on the

orbital. (Being one of Ender's pals is rather like being subjected to Orson Scott Card.) In the end, he wins the game. His last exercise, in which he attacks and destroys the home planet of the buggers, turns out, like several of the preceding ones, not to have been an exercise at all: Ender has just committed Xenocide.

Meanwhile, his sociopathic brother Peter and his deeply empathic sister Valentine have been sort of taking over the home planet. Valentine — writing under the name Demosthenes — has been advocating a right-wing back-stiffened obduracy about the war and other matters, while Peter — writing as Locke — has been sounding like a statesman. "Cleverly," to avoid detection (for they are still children) they have been, in fact, espousing each other's points of view, demonstrating en passant the opportunistic rapacity of cognition (which can think anything it wants) and the gullibility of normal folk; and before he's out of his teens, Peter is due to become — sight unseen — Hegemon of Earth. Meanwhile, after the xenocide, Ender has been led to a strange mind-game shaped arena on a strange planet, where he finds the last cocoon of the last hive-queen of the buggers, and learns that they had long ago learnt that humans were sentient too, and had long abandoned any thought of attacking them again. So it turns out that his xenocide was "unnecessary," and he decides to search for a planet where the hive-queen might nest. Valentine joins him. They prepare to spend the rest of their lives together, chastely (in this series, when Card is not being out-of-the-closet poisonous about sex, he is barely civil: like, one supposes, a Christian). The last paragraph of *Ender's Game* is one of the finest slingshots in the literature:

So they boarded a starship and went from world to world. Wherever they stopped, he was always Andrew Wiggin, itinerant speaker for the dead, and she was always Valentine, historian errant, writing down the stories of the living while Ender spoke the stories of the dead. And always Ender carried with him a dry white cocoon, looking for the world where the hive-queen could awaken and thrive in peace. He looked a long time.

House of Card John Clute

Thirty centuries pass. We are in *Speaker for the Dead*. Because of the time-compression effects of near-light-speed travel, Ender and Valentine stay young, though gaining preternatural wisdom about folk as they wander. Meanwhile, on the Portuguese-speaking Roman Catholic colony of Lusitania, home of the only other known sentient alien species in all the galaxy, two interlocked families (note the word families) of xenologists and xenobiologists signally fail to begin to understand the porquinhos, or piggies, whose zany biology follows lines time-honoured in the generic sf of the 20th century, but Card doesn't write recursively, and perhaps we are intended to think that the xenological speculations of the only 20th-century literature interested in making them did not survive the long — though computer-infested — years between now and then, and the space.

But no. We are going to have to stop here for a second. We are going to have to say that one of the biggest difficulties with the books of Orson Scott Card is that they are conceived and written with a sophistication which makes the lame predictability of their generic tropes very difficult to countenance. In *Ender's Game*, for instance, we are supposed to accept the pulp-derived conceit that one tiny batch of siblings is capable of winning an intergalactic war, running the planet, and writing (both Ender and Valentine compose books which remain famous for three thousand years) texts of such transcendent quality that nothing replaces them for centuries: Ender's studies of the buggers and of his brother's lifelong supremacy over Earth are in fact never superseded. The xenobiologists of the Hundred Planets fail to understand that any communication with an alien species affects it, so that their attempts to partially quarantine the piggies from human culture are foredoomed (as they were, in 19th- and 20th-century Earth, anywhere the white man laid his poisonously technologized hand) to do more harm than good, because part of the piggies' experience will be that of suffering quarantine. Nor do they understand that a species like the piggies — whose

members make explicit reference to the nature of females and wives and mothers, and to the father trees which grow from the dismembered corpses of honoured males – might just possibly mean what they say about their own biological nature. And so it goes. Every volume of the Ender saga – which comprises some of the most hauntingly brilliant genre writing of the decade – is vitiated by complacencies of plotting a teenager should spurn. But the problem is not simply that of a genre writer too well-hung with talent for his stupidities – polished as they will be by the cunning populist manipulations of his style – to be tolerated, after the book has been read, and the imposition noted. The problem is that Card constructs his extraordinarily intense moral universe upon a house of – yes – cards. The poisonousness of his books – images of poison well constantly to the mind – lies precisely in this investing of pulp structures with moral burdens and imperatives they transform into cruel caricature.

Whatever. Ender is Called to Lusitania to Speak for one of the xenobiologists, who has been fatally honoured by the piggies, dismembered in expectation that he will become a tree and commune with the ages. Ender arrives, becomes intimate with the two families (families again) who will, as a group, by the end of the third volume, be responsible for a galaxy-shaking sequence of scientific advances, including the defeat of an up-to-then impregnable virus, and faster-than-light travel. But the heart of Speaker for the Dead lies in a cunning presentation of the grave family romances that reave these folk, of Ender's signal role in bringing things to rights, and of the piggies. It is a long novel, so beautifully composed and paced that one can find it almost impossible to put down before finishing it. It deserves its awards, just as Ender's Game did.

W e come to Xenocide, and we find unchanged Card's magical capacity to transform chaff and generic chunter into morality play, unchanged the poison of the unfitness of the match. The Hundred Planets have sent a battle fleet to destroy Lusitania, because the virus (which is only defeated after hundreds of pages) threatens to destroy all molecular life in the universe. Meanwhile, Ender has released the hive-queen on the planet – which does seem a daft thing to do, given the fact that two species already inhabit the place – and she begins to lay. Meanwhile Jane – the computer consciousness who thinks her "circuits" are centred in the ansible web which she controls – finds her secret existence as Ender's quasi-wifely companion under sudden threat through the fact that she has been forced to instantaneously communicate various

of Demosthenes's (i.e. Valentine's) missives against the new xenocide to all the planets of the galaxy while at the same time blocking from the invading fleet the ansible command to use their killer weapon on Lusitania, and someone has noticed.

On the planet Path, young Gloriously Bright – her Chinese name, which Card uses throughout, is Qing-jao – has managed to convince herself that the Gods to whom she offers her utter submission have delegated their worldly power to the Hundred Planets, whose dictates, however cruel, must be obeyed. When ordered to do so by the Hundred Planets, Qing-jao – who is extremely brilliant, like her father: family again – penetrates Jane's three-thousand-year disguise in a jiffy, and betrays the amiable and compassionate Al/paraclete to her corrupt and terrified bosses, even though her father has just been convinced that the god-chosen of Path – he and his daughter are two – obey the cruel dictates of their gods – these dictates usually being commands to repeat a rote action until a flood of release convinces them that the gods have forgiven them – because the Hundred Planets has on the one hand authorized a genetic experiment which has enhanced the intelligence of Pathians, and on the other hand has infected them with OCD, or Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, which also has a genetic base, to keep them under control. But Qing-jao refuses to listen. Jane may be doomed; and Lusitania, and Ender, and Valentine, and the piggies, and the hive-queen and all her little buggers, may all lie under threat of xenocide: but Qing-jao remains smugly adamant. In the nick of time, however, the plot turns, though it would be cruel, this early in the life of the book, to say exactly what happens: and in any case there will have to be a volume four to wrap things up properly.

In other words, the premises are junk, like all Card premises except possibly those governing the Alvin Maker series, and in the Alvin Maker series William Blake is junk. The magic, as we've said, is in the telling. Most of the book is spent on family matters, and in families, as we've more than hinted, Card clearly reposes nearly all his trust, his sense of affirmation. Like its predecessors, Xenocide is a family romance. It is haunting, compulsive, urgently readable. It is timed and calibrated with the story-telling genius of a writer who thinks he knows that what he knows is true, and who knows exactly how to convey this conviction. Bur writers who think they know what they know are dangerous to read, and Orson Scott Card, who is the very best of them all, is by that token the most dangerous of them all. For this reason – because his "knowledge" carves like razors into other peoples' minds and

hearts, and lies there – he cannot be liked. But we love him, too.

This is the beginning. An essay on Orson Scott Card will appear in *Interzone* within a few months, and will carry on from here.

Four Go Mad in Harrogate Mary Gentle

T here were four of us sitting together discussing horror stories – although not, I fear, near a lake in Switzerland; and none of us was called Shelley, or even Polidori. It was a hotel in Harrogate, it was daylight; it was a science-fiction convention panel on monsters in horror fiction.

Yesterday's monsters are today's heroes, began a question from the floor. If each age makes its fears into monsters, what happens after that age? The Victorian fear of women's sexuality creates Stoker's female vampires – but today the vampire is not villain-hero or anti-hero, but hero, pure and simple. The panel have all written fiction in which the monster must, for credibility, be a sympathetic protagonist and not a simple bogeyman. Are there any bogeymen in the 1990s that we are still afraid of?

Blasé, we were. Who can scare us old hands? Werewolves, no. Egyptian mummies, no way. Ghosts and terminators? Not a chance. Serial killers, even? Nah. Hannibal the Cannibal – way to go!

That being the case (we were asked), could any of us imagine a monster of today that we could not treat as a hero? Could we, for example, see ourselves making that well-known 1990s monster, the paedophile or child-abuser, into an approved of story hero?

The panel, if not flabbergasted, was at least quiet for some considerable time. So there are bogeymen to whom we react with a knee-jerk evil, no matter how unwisely. Well, well. We learn.

It didn't occur to me until much later that Freddie Krueger, invading the bedrooms and dreams of prepubertal screen children, is reasonably close to the child sex-abuser as hero. Damn. I probably wasn't the only one who earmarked the thought for fiction – art has no conscience – but it's already been done.

H orror fiction still has villains and heroes, innocents and victims. Effective horror stories make us care about the victims, too, which Charles L. Grant duly does in *Stunts* (Tor Books, \$19.95). It's difficult to review a book written on the other side of the

Atlantic, set in locations about which experience has made one proprietorial. Why is tarmac referred to as blacktop? Why does the village policeman in "Bettin Wells," Wiltshire, carry a nightstick and wear a cap? Because he is a small-town American cop translated into Agatha Christie country, one suspects — Bettin Wells is not the commuter village or hothouse gossip factory and low-pay sinkhole that many English hamlets have become. Having said that, Evan Kendal's experiences as an American teacher loose in the Wiltshire countryside and London are well-drawn, and one might accept the narrative lapses as him slipping back into native terminology.

Stunts' central image is the "shadow of the wolf." An old ballad tells of the wolf, and the hunters who are cursed for seeing it. Afterwards, everyone they hate will die. Apparently by accident — but it is the hate that kills.

This is more ambiguous than the average genre monster. The wolf walks, but we never see it. We see instead a budding adulterous relationship between the teacher Evan and his best friend's wife, the doctor Addie Burwin, which is overwatched by Paul, the cuckolded husband. We see the interplay between teenager students planning Halloween practical jokes or stunts in Evan's school, back in the States. The two plots run parallel until Evan's return home, and climax with the passing of the hunter.

We see people who are kind and loving do hurt and harm to each other. In Stunts, the bringer of death is a victim, but the horror comes from the fact that this doesn't matter.

Despite being a pale reflection in some of its genre tropes — Carrie's high school, The Omen's vicar — Stunts keeps you reading. And it's worth hanging on to the end for the final page, which is a chiller in all the right, adult ways, and at last correctly names the wolf of whom we are all afraid.

Graham Masterton's *The Burning* (Tor Books, \$18.95), on the other hand, has it all — all the genre furniture, that is. Tor's press release tells us that "the plot involves a 'Master Race' of fire-beings ('Salamanders') controlled by the evil Otto Mander, and led by a thousand acolytes...who willingly self-destruct by fire while listening to a lost opera by Wagner." Well, yes, I have often felt that way about Wagner myself, but...

Quoting the press release is not quite fair. *The Burning* is entertaining, and a whole lot of fun. It has Salamander gods and immortal Nazis (with the obligatory female Nazi sadist, who dresses in black leather); it has intricate descriptions of people burning to death, willingly and unwillingly.

The Burning is set in and around San Diego. Lloyd Denman, ex-insurance assessor, now the owner of a fish

restaurant, receives the news of his fiancée Celia's death in a fire — but it is not an accident. Like the Buddhist monks in Viet Nam, she immolates herself; in this case, in a parking lot at Macdonalds. The tense opening sequence of the ex-Viet Nam vet who is now a short-order cook finally recognizing, by her walk, what she is about to do, and his attempt to save her, is very tautly written. There is a Hitchcockian suspense-plot as, in trying to find out why this famous pianist killed herself, Lloyd discovers that nothing about Celia's past or present is what he thought it was. There are bonuses: an insect-eating Nazi; and Tony Express, a blind Native American boy with psychic powers and attitude, who steals the show completely.

In modern horror fiction the body must be subject to all the permutations of damage we can devise. Masterton's description of a forcibly-immolated character's death may illustrate how the whole mechanism functions for the reader: "He lifted the blazing stump of his wrist in pain and amazement. He understood then that he was dead, that he was beyond healing, beyond any kind of help. In a way, it came as a huge relief, because it took away the burdensome lifelong responsibility of having to take care of his body, of having to survive." That responsibility is an ever-present weight. The human body is a fragile bag of blood, water, and soft tissue. Do we have so much grand guignol in fiction because this age is afraid of disassociation, psychic fragmentation, alienation from ourselves?

Or do we just get off on seeing someone else get their head ripped from their torso?

The Burning is a romp through most of the marketable tropes of horror fiction. What makes it satisfying to read are the moments of insight, some good characterization, and a willingness to go for over-the-top, operatic images — like a bus full of charred passengers and the mile-downwind smell of hamburger.

No mention of marketable horror is complete without the name of Stephen King, so I shall merely say that John Farris is quoted as being an influence on King's writing, and that reading *Fiends* (Grafton, £13.99), one can see many similarities.

In *Fiends* there are loving depictions of small-town American life, adolescents fighting evil (girls as well as boys); graphic, comfortable sex; intimate descriptions of pain. The horrors here come out of childhood and history. In 1906 the small American community of Dante's Mill is destroyed. The only surviving witness, Arne, a child, is by 1970 an elderly inmate of an asylum near the abandoned town. He paints, with shoepolish on news-

papers, "portraits" of hairless, white-skinned women with pale blue eyes. Enid, a nurse, begins to rehabilitate the old man by having him stay weekends at her house. But what destroyed Dante's Mill has only been quiescent.

Two narratives run parallel here: Arne Horsfall's memories of his boyhood trauma; and the present-day eruption of the terror, seen very largely from the point of view of Enid's teenage sister Marjory. Lunar moths infest her house. There are caves under the hills. A man is found skinned. And, sixty-odd years ago, Arne Horsfall's mother opened a case containing a mummified Icelandic corpse with a still-green vine about its neck...

Concessions are not made to liberal sensibilities about character. Marjory is a teenager in 1970; pragmatic, fiery, interested in Janis Joplin and sex and afraid of mental patients. There is a feckless female hippy and a pair of anything-but-liberal cops who are allowed to be themselves, no matter if that self is not ideologically sound.

Fiends is a very adult novel, and yet it is mostly about teenagers. Lunar moths become epitomes of metamorphosis. One of the classic horror tropes is that people, especially family and others you love, metamorphose into something unhuman and murderous. There is a constant undercurrent in the novel of teenagers (in cocoon, changing from child to adult), being forcibly shaped by adults into what they want, not what the children want.

Fiends, while it doesn't totally surprise, has a plot that's difficult to second-guess, and a "monster" all the more frightening because the explanation is incomplete in a way that satisfies. Innocence dies — but knowledge may be preferable to innocence. And then, on the other hand, it may not.

No one could accuse Mark Morris's *Stitch* (Piatkus, £13.95) of being incomplete. The narrative is loaded to break-point with details of late-Eighties life in the UK, from the pictures on coffee mugs to the captions on every poster on the walls of student accommodation, by way of references to Gollum, Garfield, Reeboks, and Fine Young Cannibals. Meanwhile characters explain their motivations minutely to each other...there is so much on the page that there's hardly room for the reader.

Ian Raven is a mature student newly arrived at Maybury University; rather taken with the quiet Annie, as opposed to her flamboyant, redheaded roommate Stephanie. The dork student, Dan Latcher, has been visited by the supernatural Peregrine Stitch, and is now the charismatic cult leader of a student movement, The Crack (no, nothing to do with drugs). There is a madman who dreams of knives and castration. There is a lot of phallic snake-imagery,

and Freudian explanation. The innocents begin to be slaughtered, and Ian is afraid that Stephanie and Annie will be next.

Some of the descriptions – student life and young male behaviour – are well-observed, and may point again to the functions of horror fiction:

"...he'd been attacked on this route before. And not just once but three times! Twice for the money, the third time for the sheer hell of it.

"The irony was that, in his younger days, with his mates, Simpson himself had handed out his share of beatings. He therefore understood the pure animal satisfaction that could be gleaned from violence, the sense of self-worth, of power. To overwhelm a fellow human being, to dominate them physically, pound them to a pulp: ah, yes, there was a thrill in that the equal of sex."

One might be tempted to advise Simpson to change his route home. It isn't long before "a cleaver flashed, blue-white, from the darkness and opened a red wet yawn beneath his chin," and we get that thrill again.

Stitch would have more energy if Ian himself was as convincingly portrayed as some of the other young male characters. Regarding the heroine, the novel doesn't quite do what Stoker did to Mina Harker and make her a couch-ridden invalid, but Annie does get her fair share of Victorian clichés. She's barely sexually active. She's only immune to the evil Stitch's magic because she is menstruating. And although her female "white magic" precipitates the book's climax while the hero can only stand by and watch, it's all right really, wimmin aren't dangerous, honest. The "raging of her soul, ancient and awesome," happens without her volition, so her not feeling guilty about acting powerfully is okay:

"It sounds so silly putting it into words," [Annie] said. "It sounds straightforward, but it wasn't; it was more... more mystic than that. I wasn't dealing with words and pictures like our normal thoughts, but with instincts and a kind of emotional knowledge, and...and femininity and...I don't know...cosmic awareness...oh, it all sounds so stupid."

Ian stroked the back of her head as though to soothe her distress away. "It's okay," he said, "don't get upset."

If that fails to engender a homicidal rage, you will probably enjoy Stitch.

Horror these days is readily identifiable. It comes with black covers and garish single-word titles, and isn't written by women. Yet, if you derive the impulse for horror fiction from the gratuitous cruelty evident in the fairytale (for early splatterpunk try "The Juniper Tree"), then the horror story was created by the "Anon." Most given to child-rearing – probably female. But that was a few hundred years ago...

Why the preponderance of male

writers at the moment? It couldn't possibly be as simple as nice young ladies not being supposed to write about punctured eyeballs, severed penises, bodies burned alive, glass jars full of clotted blood and semen, and schizophrenia. Could it?

Now that's horrific.

(Mary Gentle)

The Planet of Tasteless Blurbs

Wendy Bradley

I have never reviewed a book without reading it all the way through, however much of a dog it might be. The same apparently cannot be said of blurb-writers, those charming souls who think up the paragraph on the back cover that, along with the cover design, is there to persuade you to buy the book.

Take *Phule's Company* by Robert Asprin (Legend, £5.99). I really enjoyed this book, which is a well-written misfit-soldiers story, a kind of *Officer and a Gentleman* without the sex, about a lieutenant who strafes a treaty ceremony because of a communications error, and who at his court martial is then promoted to captain and sent to command a company of misfits on a nothing mission in the middle of nowhere because he happens to be the son of a munitions manufacturer and thus (a) impossibly wealthy and (b) even more impossibly well connected. He then does the Carry on Sergeant trick and moulds his misfits into an elite fighting force with nothing more than personal charm and an unlimited personal fortune. It's a likeable story...but.

The but is the cover blurb: "A misadventure of galactic proportions... The Few. The Proud. The Stupid. The Inept... they breathe new life into the world (sic) SNAFU. And because Fate has a perverse sense of humour, they're also mankind's last hope." Now this is insultingly inaccurate, as if we were being offered a sort of intergalactic "Carry On Virgin Soldiers," which we aren't. This is a charming, amusing book but the cover makes me think of a small child thrust under your nose by a pushy mother intent on persuading you of how cute and funny the little angel will be. You come out thinking chirlishly "huh! Call that amusing?" There will be more in the series, no doubt, judging from the final paragraph. I just hope Asprin can think up a title that doesn't have an execrable pun in it and Legend can persuade their blurb-writers actually to read the books.

Mojo and the Pickle Jar by Douglas Bell (Tor, \$3.95) is an engaging first novel in which tattooed, amoral Mojo with a mild talent for spoon-bending goes on a free-wheeling journey across bits of the Western States pursued by drug dealers and demons who want him for ripping off their drugs, his girlfriend for human sacrifice, and the thing in the pickle jar that could be a demon, the Virgin's heart or a working model of the universe for whatever makes drug dealers and demons want sources of mystic power. They are accompanied by a serene grandmother called, er, Grandmother, a Texas ranger who appears to have strayed in from another novel altogether but who manfully goes on and does what a man gotta do, and best of all a cool chicano gang called Los Lowriders who, when interrupted in mid coitus by the flight and pursuit and given a breathless resumé of the plot, decide instantly that the miraculous heart in the eponymous pickle jar must be that of Elvis and that it is therefore up to them to deal with the pursuing demon, to "get our shit together and whip its ass." Some amazing religious apparitions, a guided tour of some of the more interesting bits of the universe and a wonderful turn of phrase, like Chandler on overdrive and too many tacsos.

In *The Dragon in the Stone* by Allan Scott (Orbit, £3.99) Peter Brockman is tracing his ancestry in a Copenhagen cemetery when an old man stumbles out of an ancient burial mound, wounded, and Brockman is plunged into the middle of an unusual variant on one of those coltic twilight stories. There is a link between the luridly painted church, the family living in the farmhouse opposite it and Erik Larsen, the man from the mound, and the connection is, improbably enough, Larsen's son by an elf and the son's part in the Beowulf story. The story is OK at the beginning and end with a fair old grip, but I found it confusing in the middle, and was particularly disappointed by the chapters where you have to get through the "and so what you are saying is that the mythological monster which is trying to break down the door is in fact..." scene, which is badly handled. Worth a look, though.

A definite winner if you have the taste for its style is *The Phoenix Guards* by Steven Brust (Tor, \$19.95). This is described as a "homage" to *The Three Musketeers*, and whether or not you enjoy it will depend on how much you like the Dumas style which Brust recreates brilliantly.

The D'Artagnan character is Khaavren, a bright young man coming to make his fortune at the court of the new Emperor. The Porthos role (the big but not very bright swaggering one) is

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played by a woman warrior, Tazendra, with considerable élan and no suggestion that there is anything unusual in this world in finding warriors of either gender. The Athos role, the noble with the tragic secret, is filled by Aerich, who has the distinction of being the first hero I have ever encountered who amuses himself in lacunae between fights with a little crochet work. The fourth character, Pel, who is the aesthete and lover like Aramis, is slightly less well rounded but nonetheless comes up with a singularly witty plan to rescue our heroes when they find themselves confined incommunicado in the statutory deep dark dungeon towards the conclusion of the plot.

The world is, apparently, the same world as in the author's Vlad Taltos series but a thousand years earlier, although I found it quite easy to pick up the local colour without having any of the other books to hand – the occasional smack against an unfamiliar concept (the Emperor's orb literally orbits around his head and emits coloured light which indicates his mood or whether someone is telling the truth) or unexpected note (people refer casually to when they were eighty, mere children, and I never did learn whether they lived for millennia or on a planet with an extremely short year) is useful to remind you that you are reading fantasy and not only a Dumas parody. The style, with its honorifics and courtesies, is a little difficult to penetrate at first, so that you might find you need to read it in solid chunks to give you a chance to read into the dialect rather than, say, picking it up for a few minutes at a time on a train, but I urge you to make the effort.

And then there is **Bill the Galactic Hero on the Planet of Tasteless Pleasure** by Harry Harrison and David Bischoff (Collancz, £13.99). In the beginning there was Bill the Galactic Hero and BTGH on The Planet of Robot Slaves, both by Harrison. Then came BTGH on The Planet of Bottled Brains, which was by Harrison and Sheckley and was OK if you like *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* parodies, and who doesn't. But now we have BTGH on The Planet of Tasteless Pleasure and we must begin to ask ourselves whether, as well as having an artificial cloven hoof, fangs, a corrugated liver and some very unhappy synapses, Bill has met the Fate Worse than all the Fates Worse Than Death and been sharcropped? Certainly the book doesn't read like an ur-Harrison. For one thing, it just plain isn't funny enough. It is funny, sure, but not funny enough to get past the obscurity of the references – a *Dhalgren* parody and a song comparing Joseph Campbell with John W. Campbell both work, but will they work for the proverbial man on the Clapham omnibus?

I came out at the end congratulating myself on the catholicity of my reading rather than chuckling at the jokes, and smug is no substitute for hysterical. The language doesn't come across like Harrison either – would he have written "Bill frothed and writhed on the table, as the hormonally fomented tides of macho bullshit coursed through his cerebellum"? You could use it in a funny story, when you were getting your effects from the contrast between the pomposity of your style and the stupidity of your plot, but it doesn't work for pages and pages which is what we have here. Nah – in the end it is "the starship named Desire" that gives it away – would Harrison have passed up what is clearly a much better title?

(Wendy Bradley)

All-Time Classic SF Plots

Ken Brown

First, three novels aimed at older children.

Invitation to the Game by Monica Hughes (Methuen, £8.95) is a rehash of one of the all-time classic sf plots. A group of teenagers, thrown onto the scrapheap of unemployment in a future in which no one needs to work (and yet those who can't get work live in considerable poverty – economics is definitely a zero-sum in this world) are persuaded to take part in a role-playing game involving a computer simulation of an alien world. Of course, after doing rather well, they are suddenly transplanted to the real place, abandoned there, and forced to re-found civilization (which seems to take around 18 months), after which our heroes sink into a fulfilling life of basket-weaving and motherhood. I do not exaggerate! The narrator, musing on her good fortune towards the end of the story, tells us that:

"We have discovered...there need be no separation between what used to be called 'work' and 'play'. We do everything as well and joyfully as we can and it turns out to be beautiful. Propped up in a corner is the basket-work cradle I was twining..." That's all very well, but the political subtext of the book is that you achieve this state of grace by playing the game, accepting your fate and trusting in the well-meaning, all-powerful State which to all appearances has thrown you on the rubbish heap at age 16. That old Marxist William Morris would be turning in his grave if he could ever have bothered to read such a lightweight book as this.

At least **The Duplicate** by William

Sleator (Heinemann, £8.85) isn't so oppressively wholesome. In fact it is quite nasty. A boy finds a machine which can duplicate living beings (presumably we are meant to have seen enough *Twilight Zones* to realize that it has somehow fallen out of the future), and makes a copy of himself. The first half of the book tediously avoids all the obvious comic and most of the philosophical potential of this situation. The second part follows the rather messy attempts of the duplicates (triplicates by the end) to kill each other. The survivor gets the girl, leaving a rather unpleasant taste in the mind not helped by the queasily naff cover art. I removed the dustjacket before I felt able to read it on the train and was disappointed to find the same picture on the boards, forcing me to bend it back. This wasn't hard because, both the Hughes and the Sleator are rather short (less than 180 pages of text, with largish print) and no bargain at £8.95.

Perhaps the idea is that teenagers have less attention span than adults. My, not exactly statistically reliable, feeling is that if they read at all on their own account they spend more time at it than adults – but then I never saw the point in specialist fiction for older children when I was one myself. I sometimes suspect that they are targeted at nervous parents, non-reading relatives, or overworked teachers and librarians who are looking for something "suitable" for their charges without wishing to actually read the books themselves.

At least **Sassinak** by Anne McCaffrey and Elizabeth Moon (Macdonald/Orbit, £12.95) gives you your money's worth of words. A girl is captured by Space Pirates and grows up to be a starship captain, in a stock space-opera universe containing exotic aliens, a Federation and a Fleet, whose officer cadet school is the making of our heroine. There is almost nothing original here amongst the overtones of *Hornblower*, *Heinlein* and *Star Trek*, no moral except perhaps the necessity of duty and of taking people and not-people as you find them; the only obvious politics is a rather heavily done and untheoretical anti-racism. If I was twelve I would much prefer this book to the previous two. I confess I do now. It is even exciting in places.

In **The Dark Beyond the Stars** by Frank M. Robinson (Tor, \$19.95) an amnesiac young man trying to regain his lost life on a generation ship decaying into the second millennium of a futile search for life on other worlds is drawn unwittingly but inevitably into the conflict, apparently renewed in every generation, between the disillusioned crew who want to return to Earth and the obsessions of the apparently immortal Captain. Despite the

long-winded treatment of the not-all-that-surprising twists of plot, this is a frequently interesting and occasionally poignant novel that repays reading. It is ridden with the various arguments (with or without relevant data) for the existence of life on other worlds. In the end (and it takes its time getting there), the ship returns home to find...well, I am sure there will be a sequel.

Andrew M. Greeley is not a name that makes me grab a book from the shelves but his and Michael Cassutt's **Sacred Visions** (Tor, \$24.95) is well worth reading. It is an anthology of Catholic science fiction. In his introduction Greeley claims great things for the Catholic influence on sf, too many things for my mind. He holds that "the Catholic religious sensibility" differs from Protestantism, Islam and Judaism in that it has made its peace with nature and the material world, leading to an "Analogical imagination," in which the world is treated as like God. This is opposed to the "Dialectical imagination" of Protestants, Jews and Muslims, which is ever ready to point out the dangers of confusing the created with the Creator. He also holds that "once a Catholic, always a Catholic," because if Catholicism is allowed "to fill the imagination with its pictures and stories" in childhood "the imagination will remain durably Catholic."

I have some problems with this. In the 17 centuries since Constantine, Rome has spread her wings over a pretty diverse bunch of believers, from iconoclasts to Jansenists to Ukrainian Uniates, to semi-Pelagian modalists (probably the dominant form of popular Christianity in England today, for what it's worth). The theology of Augustine (computer-simulated in Jack McDevitt's story "Gus," included in this volume) is more like that of modern-day evangelical protestants than many Catholics; and the ascetic Hispanic Christianity of Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuits has no truck with the conflation of God and the world either. Indeed, this is one of the themes of "A Case of Conscience," by James Blish, perhaps the best-known as well as the best story in this book. And what about C.S. Lewis, one of Greeley's admitted influences, who was brought up as an Ulster Protestant?

But there are two big things going for the argument. First, true or not, it is at least great fun. Second, it provides an excuse, as if one was needed, for gathering these stories into one place. All are worth reading. The Blish, "The Quest for St. Aquin" by Anthony Boucher (in which a priest in an age of persecution seeks the shrine of a robot saint) and "A Canticle for Leibowitz" by Walter Miller (the affairs of a desert monastery attempting to preserve scientific knowledge through the new

Dark Age that follows the next great war) are amongst the all-time classics of sf. The only possible disappointment is "Xorinda the Witch" by Greeley himself, but perhaps that's due to the company it keeps. "Trinity" by Nancy Kress and "Curious Elation" by Michael Cassutt are very different stories that share a painfully clouded atmosphere of spiritual ruin and moral doubt (although the Cassutt offers a hope of a very strange redemption). The Jack McDevitt, J.P. Kelly, Jeff Duntemann, Gene Wolfe and Robert Silverberg (who I don't believe to have been raised Catholic) are well above average. The last story, "And Walk Now Gently Through the Fire," is typically exuberant R.A. Lafferty word-play and misdirection, concerning the fate of a party of Queer Fish, stranded on an Earth depopulated by the Great Copout. This is perhaps the only bit of explicit Christian propaganda in the book and perhaps the best fun as well.

(Ken Brown)

Plaid Genitals Jones & McIntosh

If titles alone sold books, **The Unusual Genitals Party** (CRM Ltd., £3.50) might draw a lot of readers, not all of them from the science-fiction field. In fact it's a collection of eight sf short stories (one of which provides the title) from new/fairly new writers, all of whom belong to the same Glasgow writers' circle. Unfortunately, most of these stories – and the collection as a whole – fail to satisfy.

The strong point of Michael Moon-ey's "John Knox Overlooking the Necropolis," an intelligently observed overview of the physical and spiritual destruction of a near-future Glasgow, is some good writing. But it is more of a sketch than a story, however well drawn, and ultimately little more than anecdotal. "On the Other Side" by Veronica Colin, set again in a near-future Caledonia, takes the overfamiliar theme of "haves meet have-nots" and doesn't really have anything fresh to say about it, but at least it does fulfil its clearly stated purpose and keeps you reading through its brief span.

The longest story in the collection is "Rattlesnake Meets Crow" by Gerry Morton, which takes place in a world drawn from the quasi-mystical (and very fashionable) world of the North American Indian. But the plot is mystifying to the point of total obscurity, and, long before the end, concentration and interest are likely to wane. Michael Cobley's "Tactics at Twilight" similarly consigns itself to the worthy-but-dull category. Cobley quickly steers his hero away from Glasgow

towards a long and apparently pointless sea voyage which may be taking place in an alternative timeline. Or may not. All we know for sure at the end of both the Cobley and the Morton stories is that they remain determinedly opaque and for no good reason. By contrast, Jim Steel's "Shivering Sam Points the Way" is comprehensible enough, but, with nothing better to engage us with than the old household – appliances – get – smart chestnut, is little the better for it. Then there's "In the Dark Time" (apparently a winner in the *Glasgow Herald* short sf competition) by Elsie Donald, which is no more than some brief notes for a potentially interesting "visitors from the future" story, and the wholly unfathomable "Out of the West" by Richard Hammersley.

Perhaps not altogether surprisingly, given the fact that it's been chosen to title the entire collection, the best story here is Fergus Bannion's piece, about a narcissistic student party on the theme of those "unusual genitals" of the title, and a truly exotic alien life-form who gatecrashes with disturbing consequences for the other guests. Despite (or perhaps because of) its overt shock value, it has a somewhat dated quality – the feel of a story that might have appeared in *Interzone* during its first few years – and the opening pages are slow and at best tangential to the main body of the story. Nevertheless it's a seriously and solidly written work that manages to be convincingly and engagingly weird.

Clearly, **Unusual Genitals** (available by post from M.V. Colin, CRM Ltd, 141 St James Road, Glasgow G4 0NS at the stated £3.50 including postage) isn't aiming for the volume sales of a *Zenith* or an *Other Edens*. This is a slim volume – 36 A4 pages – and though it's well enough produced, with some pleasing line-drawings (none of them of sexual organs), it isn't cheap – and in the final analysis, this collection delivers reading which although largely painless is only rarely profitable.

(Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh)

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UK Books Received

June 1991

The following is a list of oil, sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by *Interzone* during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics of the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Asimov, Isaac. **Nightfall and Other Stories**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21255-8, 445pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF collection, first published in the USA, 1969; this is the first UK paperback edition to appear in one volume; it's naughty of Grafton to reissue it [without "and Other Stories" on the cover] at a time when it might be confused with the Pan Books-published novel *Nightfall* by Asimov and Silverberg.) 11th July.

Asimov, Isaac, Charles G. Waugh and Martin H. Greenberg, eds. **The Mammoth Book of New World Science Fiction: Short Novels of the 1960s**. Robinson, ISBN 1-85487-084-X, 506pp, paperback, £5.99. (SF anthology, first edition [?]; contains well-known stories by Dickson, Farmer, Laumer, McCaffrey, Silverberg, Zelazny, etc.) 15th July.

Asprin, Robert. **Little Myth Marker**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-974530-5, 167pp, paperback, £3.50. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1985; sixth in the "Myth" series.) 4th July.

Ballard, J.G. **The Kindness of Women**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-223771-7, 286pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Semi-autobiographical non-sf novel by a prominent sf writer; first edition; it's billed as the "sequel to *Empire of the Sun*," though the action begins four years before the events of the earlier novel; highly recommended; proof copy received.) 19th September.

Blish, James. **After Such Knowledge**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-983100-7, 730pp, paperback, £5.99. (Historical/fantasy/sf omnibus, first edition; contains the novels *Doctor Mirobilis*, 1964, *Block Eoster*, 1968, *The Day After Judgement*, 1972, and *A Case of Conscience*, 1988; Blish himself referred to these books as a "thematic trilogy," though they are all very different; one is a historical novel about Friar Roger Bacon, two are horror/fantasy novellas about the Devil coming to Earth, and one is a Hugo-winning science-fiction classic about an "unfallen" alien planet.) 4th July.

Bradley, Mark. **The Heirs of Hammerfell**. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-982740-9, 300pp, paperback, £3.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1989; a "Darkover" novel.) 4th July.

Brust, Steven. **Tallos and the Paths of the Dead**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-30792-4, 181pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 12th July.

Chalker, Jack L. **Medusa: A Tiger by the Tail**. "Volume Four of The Four Lords of The Diamond." Penguin, ISBN 0-14-012322-9, 294pp, paperback, £4.50. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1983.) 27th June.

Cherryh, C.J. **Heavy Time**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-54809-0, 314pp, hardcover, £14.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1991; the latest in the author's "Merchant" series.) 4th July.

Compton, D.G., and John Gribbin. **Ragnarok: A Novel**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05119-8, 344pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Near-

future thriller, first edition; proof copy received; David Compton's first new novel in some years.) 3rd October.

Cooper, Louise. **Infanta: Book 3 of Indigo**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21335-X, 318pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1989.) 27th June.

Cooper, Louise. **Nocturne: Book 4 of Indigo**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21336-8, 291pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1989.) 27th June.

Cooper, Louise. **Troika: Book 5 of Indigo**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21337-6, 268pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 27th July.

Craig, Brian. **Ghost Dancers**. "Dark Future." GW Books, ISBN 1-872372-34-1, 240pp, £4.99. (Shared-world sf novel, first edition; "Brian Craig" is a pseudonym for Brian Stableford.) Late entry: May publication, received in June.

Duane, Diane. **Deep Wizardry**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-52646-0, 254pp, paperback, £2.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1985.) 18th July.

Eddings, David. **The Sapphire Rose: The Elenium, Book Three**. Grafton, ISBN 0-246-13347-3, 527pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1991; proof copy received.) 2nd September.

Gentle, Mary. **Rats and Gargoyles**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13627-1, 510pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by Gwyneth Jones in *Interzone* 42.) 18th July.

Greenberg, Martin H., ed. **Nightmares on Elm Street: Freddy Krueger's Seven Sweetest Dreams**. Futura, ISBN 0-7088-5227-0, 289pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror anthology, first published in the USA, 1991; contains seven original stories about the movie monster by Nancy A. Collins, Wayne Allen Sallee and others.) 27th June.

Hartwell, David G., ed. **The Dark Descent: The Colour of Evil**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20881-7, 491pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror anthology, first published in the USA, 1987; contains reprint stories by Ray Bradbury, Nathaniel Hawthorne, M.R. James, Stephen King, H.P. Lovecraft, E. Nesbit and many others. This UK paperback edition is just half of the original massive book; both parts were published in hardcover by Grafton in 1990 but we didn't see them, and this is the first volume we have been sent for review.) 27th June.

Herbert, James. **Creed**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-94743-4, 364pp, paperback, £4.50. (Horror novel, first published in 1990; our review copy came with an "exclusive presentation" videotape containing the TV/cinema advert for the novel.) 1st July.

Hockley, Chris. **Seven Little Girls**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21124-1, 380pp, paperback, £4.50. (Horror novel, first edition; a second book from the author of *Steel Ghost*.) 11th July.

Jones, Diana Wynne. **Black Maria**. Methuen, ISBN 0-416-17212-1, 207pp, £9.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition.) Late entry: May 1991 publication, received in June.

Jones, Stephen, and David Sutton, eds. **Fantasy Tales**. "Issue No. 6, Spring 1991." Robinson, ISBN 1-85487-059-9, 186pp, paperback, £2.95. (Horror/fantasy anthology [actually, a magazine in book form], first edition; contains new stories by Marvin Kaye, Kim Newman and others, plus reprints by R. Chetwynd-Hayes, Neil Gaiman, Thomas Ligotti, William F. Nolan, etc.) 15th July.

Koontz, Dean R. **Chase**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0301-6, 244pp, hardcover, £14.95. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA under the pseudonym "K.R. Dwyer," 1972.) 4th July.

Lively, Penelope. **The Revenge of Samuel Stokes**. Mandarin/Mammoth, ISBN 0-7497-0601-1, 122pp, £2.95. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1981.) Late entry: May 1991 publication, received in June.

Martin, David. **Lie to Me**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3507-4, 406pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 11th July.

Miller, Rex. **Slice**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-30440-2, 317pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 12th July.

Newman, Kim. **Jago**. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-71725-1, 537pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) October.

Powers, Tim. **The Stress of Her Regard**. Grafton, ISBN 0-246-13153-5, 431pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; publication of this book has been delayed from the previously announced date of April 1991.) 3rd October.

Pratchett, Terry. **Witches Abroad**. "A Discworld Novel." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04980-4, 252pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 7th November.

Shatner, William. **TekLords**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02126-6, 224pp, hardcover, £13.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1991; sequel to *TekWar*; longtime sf author Ron Goulart is said to have a large hand in the production of these novels by a well-known TV actor.) 18th July.

Simak, Clifford D. **Immigrant and Other Stories**. Collected and with an introduction by Francis Lyall. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0644-0, 190pp, paperback, £3.99. (SF collection, first edition; like three of the four previous Lyall-edited volumes of Simak tales [The Moroth Photograph, Brother, Off-Planet and The Autumn Land], this is a mixture of old and "new"; by our count, two of the seven stories have not appeared in previous Simak collections - "I am Crying All Inside" [1969] and "Byte Your Tongue" [1980]; there's still a fair amount of uncollected Simak, though, and no doubt Mr Lyall will be spinning the material out over several more volumes to come - if those indulgent folk at Mandarin permit.) 1st August.

Stableford, Brian. **The Angel of Pain**. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-71727-8, 396pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *The Werewolves of London*.) 12th August.

Sutton, David, and Steven Jones, eds. **Dark Voices 3: The Pan Book of Horror Stories**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-777, 317pp, paperback, £?? (Horror anthology, first edition; proof copy received; contains new stories by Kathi Koja, Mark Morris, Bob Shaw and others, plus reprints by Ramsey Campbell, Graham Masterton, David J. Schow, etc.) October.

Tessier, Thomas. **Secret Strangers**. Futura, ISBN 0-7088-4920-2, 317pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror [?] novel, first published in the USA [?], 1990.) 7th June.

Yeovil, Jack. **Beasts in Velvet**. "Warhammer." GW Books, ISBN 1-872372-38-4, 269pp, £4.99. (Shared-world fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *Drochfenfels*; "Jack Yeovil" is a pseudonym for Kim Newman.) Late entry: May publication, received in June.

Yeovil. Jack. **Comeback Tour**. "Dark Future." GW Books, ISBN 1-872372-19-9, 237pp, £4.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition; sequel to *Demon Download* and *Krokodil* series, featuring Elvis Presley as hero; "Jack Yeovil" is a pseudonym for Kim Newman.) Late entry: April publication, received in June.

Zahn, Timothy. **Heir to the Empire: Star Wars, Volume 1**. "The saga continues!" Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02481-8, 361pp, hardcover, £9.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; the first of a new trilogy which continues the story from George Lucas's films.) 8th August.

Overseas Books Received

Bova, Ben. As on a **Darkling Plain**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-51546-3, 287pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1972; it contains an undated afterword by the author, "The Saga of 'The Others,'" which presumably first appeared in the previous Tor paperback printing of 1985.) June.

Dellow, Ellen, and Terri Windling, eds. **The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, Fourth Annual Collection**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-06005-X, 552pp, hardcover, £27.95. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; contains two selections from *Interzone*, Sharon M. Hall's "The Last Game" and Jonathan Carroll's "The Panic Hand," plus stories from numerous other magazines and anthologies, ranging from the New Yorker and *P Playboy* to various small-press publications.) 1st August.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **The Year's Best Science Fiction, Eighth Annual Collection**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-06006-4, 624pp, hardcover, £27.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; contains two selections from *Interzone*, Greg Egan's "Learning to Be Me" and Ian R. MacLeod's "Past Magic," plus two stories each from *Omni* and *P Playboy*, one each from *Alien*, *Sci. Amozing*, *Analog*, *New Pathways*, *Other Edens III*, *Universe 1*, *Semiotext(e)*, *F & SF* and *Zenith 2*, and a whopping ten [yes, 10] from *Asimov's*.) 1st July.

Farmer, Philip José. **Red Orc's Rage**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85036-0, 278pp, hardcover, £18.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a late appendage to the author's "World of Tiers" series.) October.

Jordan, Robert. **The Dragon Reborn**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85254-1, 590pp, hardcover, £22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; third in the "Wheel of Time" series.) November.

Kagan, Janet. **Mirabile**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85220-7, 278pp, hardcover, £18.95. (Sf novel, first edition; the opening section, "The Loch Moose Monster," topped a readers' popularity poll when published in *Asimov's* as a separate story.) October.

Niven, Larry. **Playgrounds of the Mind**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85219-3, 487pp, hardcover, £22.95. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; a mammoth follow-up to the author's earlier omnibus, *N-Space*.) October.

Norton, Andre. **Wheel of Stars**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-51678-8, 318pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1983.) June.

Resnick, Mike. **Stalking the Wild Resnick**. Introduction by Brian Thompson. NESFA Press [Box G, MIT Branch PO, Cambridge, MA 02139-0910, USA], ISBN 0-915368-45-5, 216pp, hardcover, \$15. (Sf and non-fiction collection, first edition; it's also

available in a limited autographed, slipcased edition priced at \$30 [not seen]; unfortunately, it doesn't contain a full Resnick bibliography, which would have been an interesting thing indeed – before "coming out" as an sf writer under his own name, he reportedly wrote hundreds of pseudonymous novels over a period of more than 20 years.) May?

Resnick, Mike. **Bwana & Bully!** "Tor SF Double No. 33." Tor, ISBN 0-812-51246-4, 179pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf collection, first edition.) June.

Roberts, John Maddox. **The Black Shields: Book Two of Stormlands**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-50629-4, 377pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) June.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **Pacific Edge**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-50056-3, 326pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1990.) June.

Saberhagen, Fred. **Mindword's Story: The Sixth Book of Lost Swords**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-51118-2, 250pp, paperback, \$4.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) June.

Womack, Jack. **Heathern**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-50872-6, 215pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1990.) June.

Interaction

Continued from page 5

would rather see is a good mix of different types of sf in each issue, covering the entire spectrum of subject matter and emotion.

I was naturally interested in the small-press reviews. Mr Kenworthy appears, from his comments, to be one of those who favour the more "experimental" trends in sf. In this, I feel he is out of touch with the trends of the nineties, which seem to be heading, as you state (and we at *Dream* have predicted for some time) back towards a more traditional and outward-looking brand of sf. I must, however, make one thing clear. We at *Dream* have no particular political overview; what we are against is the trend, in some quarters, to view only radical/left sf as worthwhile. We want the whole spectrum of political opinion to be represented and let the readers make the choices. As to Mr Kenworthy's comments on weak fiction, well, opinions on just what is weak fiction seem to vary tremendously (for proof look at Paul Campbell's letter in the "Interaction" column). Certainly the Rik Gammack story which Mr Kenworthy dismisses so lightly was one of our readers' favourites in the particular issue he mentions.

Interestingly, the Stephen Baxter novella which you are running in *IZ* 49/50 is a direct sequel to a couple of short stories that appeared in *Dream* (issues 14 & 20). I wonder if Mr Ken-

worthy would have found those stories "weak," or if he has the same opinion about Steve Baxter's *IZ* efforts. My own feeling is that, along with several other new writers who have been strongly represented in the small press over the past few years, Baxter has developed into one of the most exciting up-and-coming writers of the nineties, and *Interzone* here deserves praise for first publishing him, at a time when his type of sf was hardly in vogue. Other writers who I think will be up there with him in years to come include Peter F. Hamilton, Keith Brooke and Eric Brown.

Lastly, to avoid confusion among your readers, can I just point out that the current issue (29) of *Dream* is the last under that name. We are relaunching the magazine in A4 format as *New Moon Science Fiction*. Despite the name change, however, I can assure all those interested that we will be continuing our existing policies. It's nice to think that others may be beginning to catch up with us.

Trevor Jones

Editor, *New Moon SF*
1 Ravenshoe, Godmanchester,
Huntingdon, Cambs. PE18 8DE

Dear Editors:

Reading issue 49, I was amused to see Paul Campbell's letter. Being a young author in a similar position to him, also unpublished in *Interzone*, perhaps I should be sympathizing with him.

However, I find I must defend *IZ*. It is true that you occasionally print stories I feel I could have done better, and sometimes I don't like stories but can appreciate they are well written. When I began subscribing three years ago, I found many of the stories incomprehensible, thinking this was why no-one was reading sf any more, but since then the standard has improved consistently.

My main concern with Mr Campbell is that he should be able to pick up a book and immediately brand it as "inaccessible bullshit." As an aspiring writer, he should be reading everything, with an open mind. At the end of a story it is fair to judge it as lousy, or not really clear or saying anything, but I've usually discovered I learn something from them all. To exclusively restrict one's reading to a few old favourites, self-confessed to be unoriginal, is to take a very narrow view of the possibilities of the field.

If one has just renewed my subscription, although I may regret that decision if you reject my next submission!

Daniel Buck
Nethybridge, Scotland

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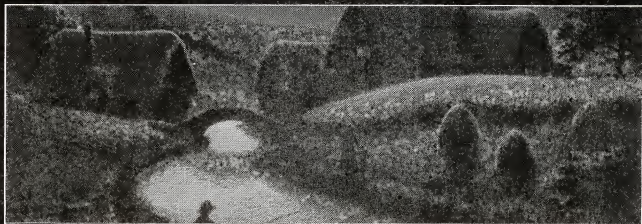
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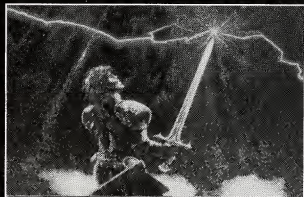


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